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OUR SONS ARE LABELED BEHAVIOUR DISORDERED: HERE ARE THE STORIES OF OUR LIVES

by

JOY RUTH MICKELSON ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY

Department of Educational Psychology

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring 1995

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Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

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ABSTRACT

This inquiry arose from the personal practice and awareness of the inquirer that, in current research, little had been heard from mothers whose sons had been labeled behaviourally disordered. The inquiry covered a twelve month period and its method is narrative. Four mothers tell stories of their lives and their experiences with their sons. The narrator, who has been in relationships with children and their families for many years, interweaves her living experiences with the mothers' stories. The research findings are presented as letters to them, sharing their voices and their reflections on their words, actions, and feelings. The narrator also reflects; and an ongoing dialogue is mutually explored. Themes and patterns uncovered include: early influences in the mothers' lives; the unique qualities of their sons; relationships with professionals; and mothers' own practical knowledge. The narrator uncovers the uniqueness, not only of their labeled sons and the professionals in all their lives, but also of the mothers and their way of being in the world. The stress that they have felt, and the courage with which they have faced their lives, is highlighted. The mothers and the narrator hope their voices will be heard by those who relate to children and their families. The ambiguities associated with labeling in the context of a socially constructed world, where tensions remain between different paradigms for the creation of knowledge, have guided this study.

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These are my beginnings

November/December 1993

Dear Mothers, Louisa, Lena, Caroline and Joan,

You are familiar with the story that follows. I read it to you soon after we first met because I wanted you to know what led me to you. And I wanted you to know more than the bare bones of "Joy-Ruth Mickelson, student, interested in knowing about your lives as mothers of labeled sons." I needed to share with you my eagerness to hear and understand your stories and experiences, to twine them with my own, and then to write a narrative that would seek audience with those who care about children and their families.

I hope that I haven't confused you by using both my given names, for when I first introduced myself to you on the telephone I used my middle name only, as I had started re-using both just before I began this inquiry. The two names were chosen by my parents and, as I join the names together again, I am aware that it is with great joy that I write these letters to you. I explain the details of how I went about it, more traditionally referred to as the method, in my next two letters and include in them excerpts from the formal proposal that I wrote. What follows below is the the story of my early teaching and learning and the path which led to this inquiry that I had written in that proposal.

Shout It Louder.

From across the field and through the raw wind their plaintive voices came hauntingly, alone and then in chorus: " We hate it here. We hate you too! This school stinks. We're running away. We're going to find our mu-u-u-m" .

Oh dear! The Sollies are running away again. She called encouragingly, hoping her warmth would travel the distance: "Supper's almost ready. We'll telephone your mum later...It's Shepherd's Pie...ie." That was a low blow she thought, appealing to their bellies like that; yet it had worked last week. The Sollies were always hungry but this was the fourth time in three weeks that they'd tried to get to London. She remembered the loneliness of the running away, of the trying to get home to mum. "All that seems so long ago," she thought, "I was ten then and now I'm twenty-one. So much has happened in-between and I'm not going to think about it. I'm going to get on with my life because now I'm a teacher."

She was a teacher in a boarding school. She was also a housemother. She had her own group of twelve-year olds to look after. She loved them all. At night, after their house-chores were done, they would huddle around the fire in her room and tell stories or read books or sing shared songs or just sit in comfortable quiet. It was warm and cosy and she thought it helped their longings for their own homes. It helped her too, because it was hers; her very own little home with children. She didn't really have her old home anymore. Mum dead. Sister far away. Dad with new allegiances. She shook herself and thought: "Enough! I must get on with my living, my teaching."

Most of the time she felt buoyant, excited about her teaching and her classes. She knew she was learning from the wonderful teacher that Tony was. She had watched him teach the Sollies' class. They weren't in her group, they were older, were more difficult. They'd been sent away to this school by their authorities.

Like many of the boys they'd been labeled ED: Emotionally Disturbed. She remembered the time Tony had been reading a complicated classical story to his class. They had sat around him, enchanted. Sam Sollie, engrossed, found a loose end in Tony's bulky sweater. Sam slowly unravelled the knitted stitches, enlarging the ball of wool and moving gracefully around the tall, gentle man who was his teacher. None stirred. The magic of the story and its reading and Tony's acceptance diminished their own difficulties. She remembered thinking: "That's what I'm trying to do, trying to unravel. I need to know what has happened for them in their lives. Why they act the way they do?"

A few days earlier Nigel, a boy in her class, had been found jumping up and down on a tortoise, intent on smashing its shell. How could that happen? She knew so little. Would she be able to give her students what they needed to live in their world? And what about Michael? He had done nothing in class for months except draw. His drawings were all made with the inflexible point of a 4H lead. They were detailed blue prints of the London Underground. They frightened her. His locked-in-ness had also frightened her. Had she managed to break through his burrow with her own plan? She had tried. From behind an enormous white sheet, rigged precariously from a discarded washing line, her class had presented their plays. Bicycle torches had provided the wavering lights and the shadow puppets were fashioned from old cardboard and blunted scissors. The stories were their own. Their own writings of blood and gore, good men, bad men, justice and injustice. Michael had been everywhere: fixing the line; adjusting the torches; mending the puppets; stage managing the acts; and playing the bad men. And then

> his story had come out.
>
> But what could she do now? What could she do for the Sollies? It was their housemother's night off and she knew she had to do something. She shivered. They came back and they were shivering. They looked bedraggled and their long hair limply framed their unhappy tear-streaked faces. They ran to her and she held out her arms and hugged them. Later, after supper and baths, they sat beside her and snuggled closely. She sang to them. "Do you like us? Do you do you? Do you really like us? Say you do. Please. Say so. Louder! Louder! What?...You love us? You do?...Shout it! Shout it louder so everyone can hear."

early learnings

I have often re-lived those months of my first teaching. Has Michael been released fully from his tubes and tunnels or do they journey with him? Has the need to destroy life been eased for Nigel? I carry with me the lonesome landscape of the Sollies' running in the long wet grass. Their desperate need to know that they were liked and loved reflects the need of all the labeled youngsters I have known. Tony's unravelling sweater patterned an early metaphor of discovery of the complexities of troubled and troubling children. Following that first teaching experience I was privileged to teach in another boarding school where I again encountered the joys of teaching, with all its "ups and downs" and where I was able to learn from many caring and inspiring teachers. These early experiences supported and structured my future with children and their families, and with my children and my family. This is my curriculum, the curriculum that is my "life course of action" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). Pinar (1975) speaks of *currere* as the lived experience of curricula, the remembering of one's personal life in schools. Looked at in this way "*currere* aspires to cut through to preconceptual experience, which is the basis for distinctly personal meaning" (Willis, 1978, p. 316). Pinar wishes to examine how this meaning develops and how we come to know and understand our inner world of experience, always mindful that we are contextual beings bound to our biographies.

Bound to my biography I am aware of the influence of its narrative and the meanings it has brought to my living. My childhood story tells of loving and caring relationships ruptured abruptly by war and evacuation. My sister and I had endured a wrenching separation from our parents' home and nurturance and had experienced our own understandings of alienation and difference. Our need had been as great as the Sollies.

> Here were our parents walking toward us down that long, long street. We had thought this day would never come, the ten week separation had felt a lifetime. We pulled at the buckles of our roller-skates, breaking the worn leather, and stumbled and ran and fell into the arms of our mother. I buried my head in her soft belly, unable to speak. Tears of joy were falling and an unbelievable warmth was rising. My lips were clenched and I could mouth nothing. Inside me words hovered unable to be released. And then the pain of ten weeks slowly started to dissolve and my tautness relaxed. My sister too was burying and hugging. We both surfaced at the same time and stood back to revel in her presence. Silence followed and we beamed from ear to ear. Our smiles would not have been so wide had we known the separation would last three long years.

My mother died twenty-four months after that long separation and my subsequent return to London. Her legacy to me was vivid and the message given to Heilbrun by her mother was also given to me.

> Her lasting gift to me was a message remarkably clear, uncontradictory: be independent, make your own way, do not pay with your selfhood for male admiration and approval: the price is too high. (Heilbrun, 1979, p.17.)

My mother also said: "Travel, become educated. Learn languages." I carried her message with me and ascribed to it a meaning she may or may not have intended. I took it to mean: understand others and their lives. Get to know them well through their language and culture. Respect differences. Read and learn. Teach! I took my mother's message boldly; I travelled and learned languages. I respected differences. And I taught.

my curriculum continues

Through the years I have tried to bring to my curriculum the meaning I had ascribed to my mother's legacy. I became a teacher, a social worker, a counsellor, a wife, a mother, and more recently a psychologist. Since then I have been asked many times: "Well! What are you really? Are you a teacher, counsellor, social worker or psychologist? Surely you have to choose?" The question would surprise me and I wondered why I couldn't be seen as the "me of now," so I would answer, tongue-in-cheek: "Like Popeye, I yam what I yam!" Then I would add: "I am the me you now know. Everything that I have ever been has brought me to where I am now; here. That's the me that I bring to my teaching and learning, now and in the future." For when I had thought about the meaning of my early stories, as painful as some of them were, I interpreted myself as more than a survivor, I felt optimistic and full of joy. Craig (1974) speaks of the energy that is generated by recording, reflecting and reconstructing the past:

> ...not in order to wallow with the emotions associated with that...but in order to let the energy of understanding that you've coped with those emotions take you forward to look with deepened insight at the future (p.375).

But I always wanted to know more, to understand how best I could assist boys and girls, teachers and principals, mothers and fathers, and me, in unravelling and making meaning of many of the complexities of learning and teaching and behavior about which I was consulted. Nestled among the many with whom I have learned and taught and for whom I have cared have been those who had acquired various labels. Berger and Luckman (1964) refer to the "typifications" that we use to objectify our realities and the terms behavior disordered and emotionally disturbed serve that function. Van Manen (1986) reminds us that as professionals in education we are all privy to the danger of looking past the uniqueness of each child.

> Once I call a child a 'behavior problem' or a 'low achiever' or once I refer to him or her as someone who has a specific learning style, a particular mode of cognitive functioning...What happens then is that I forego the possibility of truly listening to and seeing the specific child. Instead, I put the child in categorical language, as constraining as a real prison. Putting children away by means of technical or instrumental language is really a kind of spiritual abandonment (Van Manen, 1986, p. 18).

I will tell of the many youngsters I have met and how I would try to be present to them with all my being, and when the students and I would work together, talk together and play together I would sometimes think: "Yes, these are my children." For my children would often say that...or feel like that...I remember when they looked like that when someone said that... and: "If this had happened to my child, I think that's how they would have reacted. Yes this has been my child's hurt also." And I felt their pain and cared about them; as they are my children too. Then, when parents and I would talk, and it was generally the moms who spoke, I found myself reflecting: "What would I have done if this had been my experience? Would I have had this strength, done that, answered like this, lost my cool like that, hoped like that?" Yes, in different circumstances I have done and said and felt all those things. I care about the moms I meet for I am a mom; and I am them too. But there was a moral dilemma for me when I was asked to "fix things" or "change the family in some way." I would reply: "I have no magic wand nor may I intrude without permission." I also knew that, to be meaningful and long-lasting, change and transformation have to come from within. So I would listen, and listen. And care. And try to discover mutual meanings and perhaps become a catalyst for the release of unknown or unused strengths.

I have shared my road to this inquiry and now I would like to give voice to its narrative and bring the stories that I have been told. The stories of these youngsters' mothers, these very special mothers whose stories, I have come to realise, have been heard only by the few. I am one of the few and I have listened to many mothers and have heard their pain. I have also felt their courage and heard their hopes. Now, I want to hear them tell me, me the human being, the mom the sharer, not the one-who-has-the-answers. I need to hear their stories told in the rhythm of their time and the cadence of their telling. Joining their voices will be those of their mothers and inextricably bound with all their stories will be my own story; and the voice of my own mum who died so prematurely fifty years ago will echo through. For all our stories have shaped our lives. And our voices will join together in the spirit of collaboration.

> we must invite them into our work as collaborators, sharing control with them, so that together we try to understand what their stories are about (Mishler, in Sarbin 1986, p. 249).

At times my own stories have felt like flotsam and jetsam, bobbing in turbulant seas, indiscriminate and disconnected. But with the passing of years some meanings reveal themselves and become patterned, and then the whorls become larger and significant and exciting in their possibilities. When my own children were very young I used to design fabric lengths using tjanting cups that my sister sent me from Malaysia. The cups looked like miniature teapots with their elongated handles and spouts of different size. The hot wax flowed from the spouts wherever my fancy freely took it. I, too, felt free. I write the memory and use it as a metaphor for this narrative inquiry.

A once deep-fry cooker bubbles with the heady smell of cornauba wax as dyes, brushes, pebbles, and tools tempt my hands. I create batik and tie-dye yardage, five, eight yards at a time. The pristine white cotton waits expectantly. I tjant and tie and brush and dye and crackle the wax, surprising it. My red-blue-purple hands dance together, immersing the fabric into battered galvanized buckets. I watch the dyes swirl and seep. I am transfixed as shapes appear delicately and subtly. Untying the string and removing pebbles I breathe tentatively, until gradually the whole is revealed, textured and toned in vibrant hues.

This is my hope for my present and future search, that the whole will be revealed gradually, textured and toned. For within my curricular context there exist stories that have stained my being with the tenacity of aniline dye. I will tell these stories together with mothers. We will tell of teaching and learning and will try to uncover meanings and understandings and questions waiting to be asked.

> ...teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and others' stories...people are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect on life and explain themselves to others. A person is, at once, engaged in living, retelling, and reliving stories. (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 4)

We will speak of mothers and children, of ourselves and others and all our connections.

Sincerely
Joy-Ruth

This is how I went about it

February/September/December 1994

Dear Caroline, Lena, Louisa and Joan,

When we first met I shared with you why I wanted to meet you and how I hoped that we could research and learn together and later I told you my own story of teaching and learning. My own learning has influenced significantly the way I have chosen to research and write our uncoverings and I have shared with you many of those stories. This letter tells how I went about it, I thought of it as my first steps into narrative inquiry.

Each letter bears the names of different months showing the sequence in which they were written. The last-named month on each is the one during which I may have returned to the letter to add another story or further reflections of yours or mine. A letter headed by the names of four months does not mean that it took four months to write, although on some days I compared my pace to that of a tortoise, rather, the length of time includes the many days of reading, conversation, and meeting with colleagues and friends, and with you dear mothers. There have been, as well, those "other days," days of "ups and downs" to which we are all party. On the near penultimate days of writing, I have revisited the letters and added words that will, I hope, ensure clarity and coherence. Most of the other details will sound familiar and I tell them primarily for our readers. I am also aware that some of the particulars you may not know but I think that those will be mainly my insertion of the words of other writers and I explain why I have done this in "the mingling of our voices".

In an autobiographical statement, prepared for the Ethics Committee of the Department of Educational Psychology, I explained myself further:

> In a previous thesis (Mickelson, 1983) I examined a social skills training program and its effect on students' behavior and feelings of self-esteem. The study was a pre/post test design and I used statistical analyses. During my involvement with the students their feelings and experiences of the protocols used impinged constantly on me. I had included a few of their perceptions and yet I feel that I did them a disservice, even by including the comments, for I did not travel deeply enough...

Reinharz (1992), echoing the belief held by qualitative researchers, says, that to understand our psychological and social lives, an empathic understanding is needed and that this cannot be achieved fully via the detached objectivity of the scientific experimental method, quotes Fine (1989):

> If you really want to know either of us, don't put us in a laboratory, or hand us a survey, or even interview us separately alone in our homes. Watch me (MF) with women friends, my son, his father, my niece or my mother and you will see what feels most authentic to me. These very moments, which construct who I am when I am most me, remain remote from psychological studies of individuals or even groups (p. 106).

We did meet in many places, your homes and mine, and a friend's comfortable office, and as well as sharing your stories with me when we were by ourselves, you also introduced me to your children and other members of your family and your pets, and you showed me your personal treasures and family photographs. And I felt honored by, and respected, your generosity of spirit. You echoed the words of Fine, Lena, when you spoke of your many encounters with professionals: "Let me bring a video of him playing with his buddies, you know. Why not talk to the neighbours? But that never happened."

In an autobiographical statement in my proposal I elaborated:

> When I considered my education in social work, where contextual, systemic and holistic approaches to understanding the human experience were paramount, I was aware of the paradox of being "caught up" with the paradigm of quantitative research (Mickelson, 1993)

I chose to return to qualitative research, a field of inquiry that traverses many academic disciplines. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) write that the field is surrounded by "a complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions." and they underscore the historical complexity of the field as having five distinct moments. They quote Richardson's (1991) definition of the present moment "the core of which 'is doubt that any discourse has a privileged place, any method or theory a universal and general claim to authoritative knowledge" (p. 173). Qualitative researchers use natural settings and a host of different ways "that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individual's lives" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2).

Reinharz acknowledges those who believe that both methods of research, experimental (quantitative) and naturalistic (qualitative), are essential to our "repertoire of knowledge," as do I. It's just that I feel that in the human sciences much can be lost in generalizations. Robinson and Hawpe (1986) address the latter:

> Human beings are curiously ambivalent about generalizations. On the one hand,

> we try to assimilate the diversity of daily life to a catalogue of maxims and rules of thumb. On the other hand, we emphasize the particularity of each case. We are most comfortable it seems with a point of view based on degrees of resemblance between things or between events. As noted earlier, narrative is a cognitively efficient compromise between uniqueness and universality (p.118).

the question

I had written, in an Ethics Review Document, how I had arrived at the question that I wanted to research. The more I thought about it the more I realised that it seemed as though it was for me an inevitable coalescence of diverse trails, with their beginnings in my own childhood and their continuance throughout my life. It is as though the research question became one that I was unable to resist. I had written in the document:

> I have recently "officially" retired from a career that has involved teaching, social work, counselling and school psychology. In many classes I taught and cared about children who, I was told, had behavior problems. I also saw them in hospitals where they had been placed because they were "out of control" and I knew some of them when they were away from their homes, at boarding schools or in group homes. All kinds of students were represented: boys; girls; young children; and adolescents; and they came from a wide ability range and from varied family background and experiences. I was expected to teach, or to assess and make recommendations, or to "fix" and provide intervention, or to "change the family" in some way or other.

My research statement became one that:

> ...concerns the lived experience of mothers whose children have been diagnosed as

> behavior disordered. I wish to know the nature of this experience. My purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of it and what it means for a mother. My hope is that the understandings gained may be shared with the wider community of adults who are involved with the lives of young people.

Women remain the ones who assume the major responsibility for caring for children and I limited my inquiry to mothers because I wanted to hear their stories. Like Ruddick (1991) "I mean no disrespect to the many men who now undertake the responsibilities, pleasures, and tasks of caring for children" (p. xi.), and three of you have partners who assume that caring. Since I wrote the research statement, I have extended my hopes. With my increased reading and learning and meeting you all, I realise that sharing is not enough. I want action, and I will reflect further and write later in the narrative what kind of action I envisage. However, the research question was reviewed and was accepted by the Ethics Committee and by the cooperating school board's administration.

the searching

I had discussed with the members of my Supervising Committee how I was going to find you, my mothers. The experimental method of research requires a random selection of a given population whereas in qualitative research randomization is not a requisite and I was searching for mothers who would be willing to listen to my proposed plan for a narrative inquiry and then decide whether they would be interested in joining me. The differing philosophy behind the two approaches influences the language used to describe the method of the research. When we spoke I explained that I would be referring to ourselves as co-researchers who would be searching out together the meaning and our understanding of your stories, and of mine, and that I would keep coming back to you with my interpretations to ensure that I had understood your intent. In that way your responses and our opportunity for dialogue would be ongoing and we could sort our agreements and disagreements together.

I chose to limit the parameters of the study to mothers whose child was living at home; met the cooperating school district's criteria for funding as behavior disordered (Appendix I) ; and was currently being taught in a segregated classroom. I also limited the study to mothers of boys. I made those decisions based on my own awareness that throughout North America boys composed more than ninety percent of the students in segregated classes and this is so for the particular district in which your sons receive their schooling. I felt that the stories of mothers whose daughters were in those classes would be an inquiry I would like to research at a later time.

I was given the names of principals from different schools within the cooperating school district and through them the names of mothers who would agree to receive my telephone call. The request they made to mothers was brief: "Would you be willing to receive a telephone call from Ruth Mickelson. She is a university student who wishes to explain her research to you and to find out whether you would be interested in joining her. The school district has reviewed her proposal and has given its approval." In some instances the principal delegated the task and when this was done I was asked to speak to the teacher or program assistant to explain why I wanted to discuss the research with the mothers myself, and this I did.

the blaming

I explained that I had already received diverse responses from school-people when I had told them about my proposal, reflecting their own biases. Amongst other things I was told: "Those mothers won't want to hear from you; they just don't like getting calls from the school" and "They probably won't speak to you anyway, they feel blamed enough already." Some schoolfolk added: "Find me a BD kid and I'll find you his BD mom;" this would be followed by: "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, you know." I was saddened by the stereotype. I had heard from mothers who had felt blamed and had confided that their sensing of blame was initiated frequently when their youngster entered school.

This, then, was why I wanted to be the one to tell you of my hopes for the inquiry. By so doing I thought that I would be able to ensure that I would not be reinforcing any sensing of blame and that my request could be given in my own words and not filtered by others. I was told that in several segregated classes all the students lived in group homes, and that, in another, the only student living with parents was a girl. With telephone list in hand I continued my search until I had four mothers who were willing to be co-researchers, and whose son was at a different school and in a different division; and these were you.

Purposive sampling is the theoretical name given to the way we connected and it is used frequently in qualitative research. Using this sampling some seek deliberately "maximum variation sampling, in which the inquirer strives for sites, subjects, or observations that will differ from each other to the greatest degree, thus providing as much different information as possible" (Borland, 1990, p. 165).

the start of relationships

The warmth in your voices during those first telephone contacts was encouraging: "What a great idea! That's a really great idea! I'd love to tell you how things are for me," "At last someone wants to hear what I have to say. It's time for my turn." Louisa, you said: "Well...I have been listened to, but...nothing comes of it. This will help me sort things out for myself."

I eagerly awaited our first meetings. There I reiterated what we had discussed briefly on the telephone and which are the essential caveats to all research, informed consent and confidentiality. Informed consent means that researchers have explained clearly what they are proposing to do, elaborating responsibilities and obligations of both researchers and collaborators. I explained it fully, but in less formal language, and you all signed the consent form, knowing that you could withdraw from the research at any time and that your names and those of others you spoke of would not appear in the final writing. A copy of the consent form appears in Appendix II.

We discussed how anonymity might be problematic, and for you, Caroline and Joan, it was not an issue. Joan, you wanted everyone to know about the wonderful principal and teachers in Lloyd's school. A school which felt like "a real community." Caroline, you knew that everyone in Roger and Ryan's school and in your neighborhood was aware of the trauma in your lives and you knew that I would include only those parts of your story that you felt comfortable with sharing. We did decide, eventually, to use pseudonyms for you all including other members of your families and for all people and places mentioned.

We made that decision knowing that although some of you were comfortable with my using your names, we would be identifying others whose permission we had not solicited. The spectre of future litigation also raised its head and we wished to lay it to rest.

Another hope of mine, that I had written in the proposal of this research inquiry, was that you would share your lived experience and "that together we can uncover patterns and themes and meanings." I wrote that the time that we spent together would be unstructured and that I had no prepared list of questions that I would ask, but anticipated that our questions would emanate from our conversations as we reflected on them. I then wrote: "The philosophic nature of the interview will be that expected in an hermeneutic inquiry where dialogue is established in an atmosphere of trust and reciprocity." A year later I do believe that trust, mutuality and reciprocity are qualities that we have achieved, and you have told me so and thus, with our mutual energies, we shall ensure their continuance in our conversations.

Later on in this letter I refer to Thomas Barone's emphasis on the moral persuasiveness of educational stories and Nel Nodding's talk of her perspective on the moral content of dialogue which is, I think, essential to the moral persuasiveness of narratives. She contrasts this perspective with the emphasis placed in traditional ethics on moral reasoning, judgment and justification.

> In the caring orientation we are more concerned with connecting, feeling with, responding positively to expressed needs, and understanding ourselves well enough to be able to summon the attitude of care when it is needed (1992, p. 13).

It was with this orientation that I came to you. And it is this orientation that has to continue throughout my interpretation of your stories within this narrative, for in all qualitative research, including narrative inquiry, interpretation is ongoing. I had written:

> ...when I first listen to the audio-tape, I will note my reactions and write any further questions needed to clarify points of uncertainty. I will read the moms' narratives carefully and then re-read to "extract significant statements" and try to "formulate meanings" (Tesch, 1991; Giorgi, 1985; and Colaizzi, 1978). When I return the transcript, with my written comments and reflections, it is possible that moms may tell me: "No! That's not what I meant. You've misunderstood." We would then delve further and possibly re-tell and re-story and perhaps discover different meanings. From these meanings, patterns and narrative themes may emerge which will be shared and negotiated for mutual meanings.

As I read the transcripts of our conversations and write what I actually did say, I find it none too dissimilar in intent but, as we all discovered, our conversational speech was less formal:

> ...tell me how it was, or you may say "Oh yeh!, that's more or less it". So then I might say: "Tell me a little bit more if you can." Or I might say to you: "Well, some of the moms I've spoken with have said this or this, does that fit for you?" And the third time I might come back with some general themes and say: "From the things you've told me these seem to be the real key things."

We agreed that you had the ultimate veto on which parts of your stories and your words I would include and, although each time we have spoken about our conversations, its patterns and themes and you have expressed your general comfort with your words and our mutual meanings, I will, nonetheless, continue asking you until the final word of this narrative is writ, knowing that it will be retold on the morrow.

immersion in the data

I had wondered how I was going to find the patterns and themes in your stories. “How are you going to analyze the data?” I was frequently asked. I had tried to prepare myself by reading many books written by experienced researchers, and I also asked others how they had proceeded. Tesch (1990) talks about “developing an organizing system, segmenting the data, and making connections” as the three core steps to be taken (in Miller & Crabtree, 1994, p. 345). The authors refer to the collapsing of those steps in an “immersion/crystallization (which is) an extended period of intuition-rich immersion within the text” (ibid.). And this is the method that fitted for me.

I immersed myself. I read and re-read. I listened to the tapes of our conversations and then I listened again and I wrote numerous comments to you all in the margins and on the backs of our transcripts. I wrote in my journal. I typed on my computer. I have jottings everywhere. And, simultaneously, I had to know the connections with my eyes and my hands. I tell of my indebtedness to Post-it notes, and of their vibrantly luminous hues. I chose a different color for each of you, and wrote the numbers of the pertinent lines in the transcripts, in miniscule hand on the tiny notes. I then clustered these around the patterns and themes that I had pinned to an enormous board. The freedom to juxtapose, rearrange as further insights emerged, and play joyfully, enabled the freedom for coherence, which I felt I would not have achieved from a detailed codebook (I almost typed cookbook!).

presenting the narrative

The completed writing of the research, generally referred to as a dissertation or thesis, will be stored in the University of Alberta Herbert Coutts Library. I remember the surprise in your voice, Joan, when you said: "They keep them there do they?" And I made a note to myself to tell you all so that you would know where to refer others who may wish to read the narrative. The dilemma with which I am now confronted is partly of my own making but is also influenced by established traditions which prescribe a way of writing the research results. Alternative ways of presenting research results are allowed and I have chosen to write our stories, yours and mine, as letters to you, both collectively and individually. I discovered quickly that, even as I was writing to you individually, I was including responses that I wanted to share with you all. One way to solve that dilemma was to copy all the letters and ensure that everyone received them. We discussed this and it met with your approval. However, surprisingly and yet not surprisingly, as the months have advanced I find myself addressing you all at the start of each letter and then highlighting, by name, personal interpretations and responses that we both have given. I may yet travel between both ways depending on the particularities of the patterns.

You continued, Joan:

> Oh! For goodness sake! The reason, well part of the reason, is for my own self-interest. But the reason that I ask also is that one of the supervisors at my work has raised a step-son who has been through all this. She's very well-versed in all of the psychological and physical elements of all this, and she's fascinated by my involvement, and really wanted to hear...and she agreed with me that there's not very much from a mother's perspective, and really wanted to hear what the end

result was. Or if there were any new pieces that we could gather.

Like Ruth, gleaning in the corn fields of Egypt, I'm optimistic. I think there will always be new pieces, new glimmers and gleanings, new particularities to add meaning to the whole, and perhaps our particularities will enlarge and enrich the horizons of others. And that note to myself has been restoried, for with the passing of time and the engendering of its life the final narrative will comprise letters which tell the whole inquiry which you will all have, and you may choose to lend your own copy to those who wish to hear your stories.

narrative and story

The research can take many forms and I chose narrative inquiry as my preferred research method. I made the choice for many reasons, one of which is that it allows all our voices to be heard distinctly. In our initial conversations I used the words "story" and "life story" and at those first meetings we just ploughed right in, and the hours passed as if mere minutes, but here, now, I would like to write more formally about narrative.

Polkinghorne (1988) elaborates the meaning of narrative by saying that it can refer to the process, that of making the story, and the scheme of the story, as well as the results. He traces the use of narrative in the fields of philosophy, history and literature and acknowledges its more recent advent in the human sciences, especially in psychology. Biographies, life-histories and case studies have been used by psychologists to explicate their work since the mid-nineteenth century. For several decades in North America,research in the field of psychology appeared to be dominated by a natural science paradigm with its metaphor of statistics, but in the nineteen-sixties an interest in personality and the meaning humans make individually and in groups resurged, following the impact of humanistic and existential psychology. Scientists, too, acknowledge their connection with narrative. Grove, in his book "The Defense of Science" (1989) states that science:

> It is a kind of story telling, like the making of myths, but it differs from myth-making in important respects, notably in that its stories are constantly being rewritten in order to conform to the way the world is discovered to be (p. 9).

Robinson and Hawpe believe that "it is in reflecting on experience that we construct stories" and that these stories are our efforts to explain and understand our experience (1986, p. 111). Hopkins (1994) talks of narrative theorizing and refers us to Blum (1977) who wrote: "Through theorizing the theorist searches for his self, and his achievement in theorizing is a recovering of his self" (in Hopkins, p. 159). As we are women I substitute "her" for "his." For Hopkins:

> To know one's story is, thus, to know the self one has created through the most advanced stages of narrative theorizing. 'Here is who I am and here is how I became this way - but I'm still becoming" (p. 160).

And this is what we will be doing together as you theorize about yourselves and your lives with your sons.

Mishler reminds us "the distinctive feature of narratives is that they refer to meaningful and coherent courses of action, with beginnings middles and ends...narrative constructions display the dynamic ordering of events" (1986, p. 24). Theodore Sarbin says in his book Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct (1986) that narrative is the "organizing principle for human action" (p. 9) and quotes MacIntyre:

> It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our

> own lives in terms of the narrative that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the action of others. Stories are lived before they are told...(1981, p. 197).

Bruner (1986) shows us the connective quality of stories, saying that they: "give meaning to the present and enable us to see the present as part of a set of relationships involving a constituted past and a future." He reminds us: "But narratives change, all stories are partial, all meanings incomplete" (p. 153).

Stories and narratives are used by us all to reflect and expand our knowledge and understandings.

> Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the pattern of inquiry for its study. To preserve this distinction we use the reasonably well-established device of calling the phenomenon "story" and the inquiry "narrative" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

My inquiry follows the above tradition, with your lived experiences of being the mothers of a child labeled behavior disordered named stories, and our travels together, reflecting and exploring, and the writing of these letters, named narrative.

the mingling of our voices

My hope is that our words will have a vibrance that will reach a wide community of readers. The stories that you have told me, and those of mine that connect or relate in a way that I hope will open our ways of seeing, will join other writer's and theorist's words. I have chosen to present our voices in this way so that I can make the connection between our words and theirs *in situ* rather than in a separate chapter. This will ascribe to them their well-deserved space and will complement a relationship that I trust will be non-hierarchical and nonlinear but more a circle of understanding. Middleton (1993) chose this route to avoid the dilemma that she had when she was editing a textbook:

> I considered the common editorial strategy of beginning with an authoritative overview of the literature and placing the various papers in the book within the theoretical and methodological traditions of the discipline. But to do that with this text would be to remove myself conceptually and spatially from my lived world... (p. 44).

I echo Middleton's dilemma, for in this narrative inquiry our lived worlds cannot be separated, neither conceptually nor spatially; nor would I wish it to be so, for without my life as I have lived it, I would never have had your permission to enter yours. Neumann (1992) expresses an analogous thought:

> What I hear of another I can know only in terms of who I am and what I know. And as I retell the experiences of others I am there as well. It is through my eyes and ears and mind and heart that the story has sifted. The story I tell of the other is as much -maybe more- a story of me (p. 24).

She points to Spiegelman (1991) and Van Maanen (1988) who underscore the two tellings of a story, an experience: that of the teller who describes "the past knowing that the listener, existing only in the present moment, cannot fully discern without access to the past the speaker has known," (Neumann, p. 23) and the experience of the present telling of the story. She wants to ensure that in our telling "the uniqueness of self and other" is not lost. "Our abilities to grasp each other's knowing are bounded" (p. 24). Carr (1986) tells that the "temporal grasp, in varying degrees of complexity and explicitness...makes us both characters in and tellers of the stories constituted by it" (p. 95).

Even as I prepare to write the letters I am aware that things may turn out differently, for narrative has a life of its own with its telling and retelling. Steinem (1992) found this too and said: " But right away, this book had a mind of its own." I may also discover that, for clarity, I will prefer to present your words and thoughts in separate chapters. I trust that my motive is as I have suggested and does not arise from the fear that my written presentation might be rejected because it does not fall within accepted and expected parameters.

plain language, accessible to all

I want my letters to you to be readable and I want our stories to be accessible. A short statement I know, but it hides wearily shared anecdotes voiced in a study group I was in many years ago: "I've been reading all those theses and I just don't get it. It seems they're divorced from real life." Another friend said: "The language made it so arcane, all meaning was hidden. It's as though they didn't want you to understand what they were writing about." A third joked ironically: "Torturous, that's what it was, torturous! Even trying to pronounce the words. I couldn't." The obscurity of language used in scholarly papers is thought by many as a problem for academia and Diamond (1993) has addressed it: "I have not found it an easy task to put aside the familiar coat of academic scholarship and to walk out among you as me" (p. 115). The use of a personal voice has, he suggests, "often been suspected in academic writing in education of being unreliable, illegitimate, and even trivial" (ibid.). I feel confident in asserting that there is nothing trivial about this inquiry and reliability belongs to a metaphor beyond the borders of qualitative research.

Thomas Barone (1992) writes insightfully about the creation of research texts that are "accessible, compelling and morally persuasive."

> Accessibility is not, strictly speaking, a characteristic inherent within a text, but within the interactions between text and reader. Therefore, the use of certain forms of language and other rhetorical strategies may produce texts that are accessible to some readers but not to others (p. 23).

In his article he argues for "layfolk-friendly" language and I am aiming for that in this dissertation, bearing in mind that nothing in his description (of enhanced professionalism) "should be taken to suggest that we cease talking *to each other* in the manner to which we are accustomed" (p.23). He was referring to stories about the lives of school-people and I want his wishes for such texts to be extended to include the stories of your lives.

my hopes

For I hope to braid and plait the various strands of mothers' practical knowings and mother as teacher and mothers of sons labeled behaviour disordered in with the lives of school-people. The stories you have shared and the lives you are living with your sons are engaged with the lives of school-people and I would like to be an educational inquirer whose plurality of influences, learnings and experiences will allow your stories to be added to the texts of school narratives in a compelling and morally persuasive way. I have been riveted, and often shattered by the compelling quality of your stories, and I trust that I retell them compellingly. Thomas Barone's position on moral persuasiveness impugns to me a moral duty, of which I am mindful, and I refer back to Nel Noddings' perspective on the moral content of dialogue.

It is also important to me that I express myself in a way that will let you know what our conversations together over these months have meant to me. As the time we spent together increased, I believe that our connections became firmer and our mutual explorations of interpreting meanings became stronger. When I reflect on our conversations I frequently search in dictionaries to excavate root words and derivations in order to deepen and broaden the filigree of our text. Having listened, I also know that by hearing the stories of your experiences others can grow and add to their own understandings of what it means to be the mother of a youngster with the label "behaviour disordered." This is true for all of us in education, whether we are teachers, aides, principals, school psychologists, school social workers or one of the many whose lives are in schools and who relate to and make decisions that affect students and their families. You wanted other mothers to know some of the things that you feel and have come to understand, believing, as do I, that shared knowledge provides collective support and has much to offer.

I began initially to write short letters, containing one or two thoughts and responses. Then I realised that the effect was choppy and disjunctive and was negating my original hopes, for coherence is my desired goal. The metaphor of weaving is used frequently in life-stories, and I understand why this is so. The phrase "fabric of our lives" remains powerful and sometimes, as I am writing, the computer's mouse under my hand feels like a shuttle weaving the yarn in and out. At times the weft is yours and at others mine; some of the vertical threads of this narrative may belong to the experts of whom we have already spoken and of whom we have yet to speak. By introducing the experts' words my belief is that our understanding may be expanded and may, or may not be, corroborated. I am mindful also of the double-edged sword of expertise and its capacity for distancing and objectification. Other vertical threads may be our own knowing, as mothers and teachers. Those vertical threads, called the warp, are always twisted tightly on the loom, and the word has come to mean bent and twisted. I choose an early nautical meaning used in the sixteen hundreds: "to cover land with a deposit of alluvial soil; to fertilize by inundating with warp," for that meaning, with its connotation of silt and sedimented richness, acknowledges all our understandings.

the search for meaning - to be continued through this inquiry

First and foremost I know that I must write from whence my values come and by so doing I can be honest to myself and to you all. But when I reflect and wonder about this I know that they come not only from my heart, but from my gut, and my intuition, and my mind; they come from a mixture of them all. Taylor (1992) says that values become part of one's self-identity and Bruner (1990) notes that "values inhere in commitment to ways of life, and ways of life in their complex interaction constitute a culture" (p. 29). At the start of this letter I spoke of our mutual explorations of interpreting meanings and I often asked you: " Tell me what it meant for you?" or "What was the meaning you made of that?" I am reminded of Bruner's position that the cognitive revolution which started in the nineteen-fifties was: "a revolution inspired by the conviction that the central concept of a human psychology is meaning and the processes and transactions involved in the construction of meanings" (p. 33). He says that some argue:

> the new cognitive science, the child of the revolution, has gained its technical success at the price of dehumanizing the very concept of mind it had sought to

> reestablish in psychology, and that it has thereby estranged much of psychology from the other human sciences and the humanities (p. 1).

Polkinghorne (1988) refers obliquely to this estrangement when he says:

> one of the difficulties in discussing research from a human science perspective is that many of the concepts related to epistemology have been given technical meanings by the logical positivist revisions of formal science (p. 161).

He believes that we are confronted by the task of reclaiming the concepts of how knowledge is generated if we wish to evaluate research which tries to uncover meanings. I believe that your understanding and knowledge has been generated from your own experiences and that, through your stories and our collaboratively constructed narrative, others may also come to know and make meaning of your lived experiences and of their own.

Uncovering meaning has engaged us all for thousands of years and the debate continues. "Meaning is not something we discover or have infused in us from outside; it is the essence of our experiences, our becomings, as we act out, reflect on, and abstract these experiences, becomings" (Doll, 1990). Eco (1993) believes: "The problem with the actual world is that, since the dawn of time, humans have been wondering whether there is a message, and if so, whether this message makes any sense." He contrasts our quest for meaning in the actual world with the approach we bring to fictional stories where: "they give us the comfortable sensation of living in worlds where the notion of truth is indisputable, while the actual world seems to be a more treacherous place" (p. 57). Truth, reality and meaning will continue to occupy my thoughts as I travel with you all, but I am ever mindful of my own need to read for understanding and to write simply.

Lena, I want the story of yours that follows to remain with me as I go forward for I must not forget how easy it is to allow verbal pomposity to creep in:

> But that whole thing of...I was feeling really...in one of the research projects that I was in when I was at university and this one grad student...he drove me crazy all the time explaining things in very long words and really intimidating me and making me you know feel (then your voice changed and you underlined these words)...allowing him to make me feel rather slow, or you know, not quite up to par sort of thing. And finally I said: "Look! If someone is really an expert and really knows what they're doing or whatever," and you say: "Can you explain that to me in plain language?" And if they can't, they don't know what they're talking about.

I believe that in our talks we have made connections through our words and through our silences and we have teased out meanings together. I remember brushing tangles in my daughter's hair, gently persevering, unable to avoid hurting, yet knowing that each strand of hair must be freed to take its place. And this is how I felt about our untangling of ideas, thoughts and words. I shall bide your warning well, Lena.

I may write post-scripts to my letters as afterthoughts occur and as you can see from the dates on the letters I have journeyed back and forth as the months have flown. And, just as during the times we spent together there were no set questions that I had prepared and we "went with the flow," so is it now. Meanwhile, here it comes from the heart!

Sincerely,

Joy-Ruth

Postscript #1. I am not quite sure where this letter will find its place and already I am full of awe that my narrative has begun its life. At the moment it feels like a little pollywog or tadpole wriggling and scuttling its way around. But I have faith in its growth and with that leap of faith I envision its future.

Postscript #2. I discuss experts in a later letter, who they are and how they became experts and I talk about professionals and the many that you have met. Caroline, you described a "session":

> Well, I remember when Bob got arrested I went to see a psychiatrist, um, my mother-in-law talked me into going to see a psychiatrist...a psychiatrist for me...But anyway, I didn't like it. I went to two sessions....(Tell me how it was) To sit there for an hour. And they're so bloody quiet, and it's like they stare at you and they tap their pencil. You know, they sit there and they...

And you sat there Caroline, at your kitchen table, miming an impassive expression, saying not a word but slowly and rhythmically tapping your finger on the table. My heart beat loudly, in time with your finger; it felt like an intrusive metronome.

> You know, and it's...he leaves it...this whole hour. He sat there for a whole hour tapping his pencil. And at the end of the session he picked that pencil up...

And then you gave a wonderful finger-flourish Caroline, with your imaginary pencil, imitating an illegible script on a prescription pad:

> "Here you go. Take these. See me in a couple of weeks."

We both laughed. I wondered then and I still wonder, did our laughter clothe our tears?

Postscript #3. I have found myself having similar experiences to others who have been talking with women about their lives. I have imaginary conversations with you all. I replay your thoughts in my own mind and your voices, with all their tones and inflections, echo in my ears. The words I wrote in my proposal many months ago reverberate: "I need to hear their stories told in the rhythm of their time and the cadence of their telling." And I have heard these stories in your narratives, and like others:

> I dream about the people I write about-they enter in my conversations, intrude on the privacy of my bath, join me in the ocean and the garden. They tell me stories, give me feedback, disagree, suggest new sources. I listen very carefully (Ascher, DeSalvo & Ruddick, 1984, p.xxiii).

The ocean and the garden sound exotic don't they, especially from land-locked Alberta? But I recall the joy we shared, Louisa, as we peered at the tiny grape hyacinths and thrusting peonies emerging from the snow-bound soil. I continue to listen very carefully and full of care.

Sincerely,
Joy-Ruth

I continue, aided by serendipity

March/April/October 1994

Dear Joan, Louisa, Caroline and Lena,

I want to explain in this letter how some things seemed to "fall out of the blue" and led my ideas and words like a magical goad, in a direction that I had not anticipated. Then, even as I had barely discovered the signpost, the route became clear and the connections revealed. This is my serendipitous story which starts and startles this letter and tells both seriously and more lightheartedly of how we make meaning. I introduce my own story of measurement and then continue discussing the data: your words; my words; and the words of other writers. I told some of its history in my previous letter to you but here I tell some stories of keeping data. How to present the stories? in which writing style? These are next in the narrative. I then highlight the connections in this inquiry; the connections that include a movie story and stories of colleagues, students, friends, and family.

being in the right place at the write time and what does it all mean?

As I begin I must say that for the last ten months everything has seemed eerily serendipitous. I take my seat at the theatre and the foreword in the programme, written by the playwright, sings to me of my research. I sink into a plush seat in a movie house only to find the characters are "singing my song," that of my research. A word here, a gesture there, two lines of a poem, a paragraph in a book review, even the plot of a "roman policier," all have the themes of my thesis, if not in whole, then in part. Thus, when I came upon the following story in The Globe and Mail I am connected with my questions about meaning which appear regularly through my text and with Bakhtin (Clark &

Holquist, 1984) and the populous.

The article was titled "Wittgenstein meets St. Anselm as the U.S. Midwest ponders the meaning of life." Above the title were the words "Think-Off" and "A growing thirst for serious talk is revealed in a farm community's debate on the most profound topics of philosophy" was writ below. David Roberts, the journalist, reported:

> Under a gentle prairie sky on a summer's eve they arrived from throughout the U.S. Midwest: grannies and kids, ironworkers, truckers and bemused dairymen. They packed into an old general store to ponder one of humanity's enduring questions: Does life have a meaning? And if so, what?

The story of the four amateur thinkers, chosen from 650 contestants on the basis of a written essay, was amusingly if somewhat patronisingly written. Was agism and kidism evident? And I still wonder why the dairymen were bemused? (Too much moozing, perhaps?) However, much of what was spoken also made me ponder on the meanings we had made and have yet to make about your lives with your unique youngsters, and mine with my narrative. One of the "Nay" contestants said: "I watch in contempt as others fan the flames of meaning, knowing in essence time is the mausoleum of all hope and desire." According to Roberts he peppered his speech with words like "deconstructionism" and "Wittgensteinianism" and believed only in the futility of searching for meaning: "I have to accept my life as trivial." The other "Nay" contestant, talking of existence, said: "It just is, beyond meaning and non-meaning, beyond sense and nonsense, beyond understanding and misunderstanding." At that point the moderator, described as the local plumbing-and-heating specialist, and noting the apparent enjoyment of the former speaker, asked: "If life has no meaning, why are you here?" His question was received with glee by the audience.

The "Yea's" then had their turn. Roberts reported that they both believed that "life is filled with wonder and packed with profound and extrinsic meaning." Talking about our collective sense of meaning "prompted by humanity's sense of fragility and courage in the face of death" the speaker said: "This then, is the meaning that life contains, the ancient cycle of death into birth, sorrow into joy. At its core, all meaning in life is one or the other." The second "Yea" speaker finds meaning in the everyday challenges of life and believed: "Meaning comes from doing my best, from taking a risk - like being here - from listening, from laughing. It's a combination of all these things; that's where I take meaning."

We, too, have spoken of life and death, love and hate, joy and pain during the times you shared your story around our various kitchen tables and echoes of Bakhtin reverberate, triggered by mention of life and death cycles and expressions of love and laughter, all embedded in the lives of the populous. The reported populous of nine hundred and seventy-three in the above story, described itself as "a little tired" but nonetheless found that the Think-Off was valuable. "Rural people don't get exposed to this kind of thing very often. This is great. It'll give us something to think about for the next year." I wonder if they will also "talk" their thoughts in the coming year and perhaps even "walk" them. And whether, seeing themselves as rural people isolated from mainstream U.S., they feel their voice is non-legitimated. I speak of Bakhtin on other pages and of his concept of the non-legitimated voice and of carnival as a powerful trope.

Calvin, ever the seeker of life's meaning, brings his voice to pedagogy. The Calvin to whom I refer is the creation of Bill Waterton, humorist and cartoonist. Lena, you brought me many of his insightful and amusing cartoons on family life that you felt pertinent to your circumstances and experiences and I discovered his grappling with the existential question in a recent article by Noddings (1994) where she was referring to teachers' personal stories and their value to children. Her belief is that teachers' stories have value and vitality:

> ...they can help students to explore existential and metaphysical questions of the sort: Who am I? How can I find out? Does life have a meaning? Where did life come from? There was an amusing episode in the American comic strip, "Calvin and Hobbes" that illustrates the possibilities:
>
> *Teacher*: If there are no questions, we'll move on to the next chapter.
>
> *Calvin*: I have a question.
>
> *Teacher*: Certainly, Calvin. What is it?
>
> *Calvin*: What's the point of human existence?
>
> *Teacher:* I meant any questions about the subject at hand.
>
> *Calvin:* Oh. (Looking at book and mumbling to himself.) Frankly, I'd like to have the issue resolved before I expend more energy on this (p.356).

Noddings believes that we do need to discuss these issues with students (ibid.) and as students/co-researchers we, too, have tried to uncover meanings.

a lot or a little? my own story of measurement and its place in the inquiry

As youngsters my sister and I squabbled a lot, each fiercely determined to bask in the approval of our father and little realising that the wrangling and sibling spats were destined to make him even stricter. Happily he had a wry sense of humour and would recount this joke to bring us to our senses:

> Father cut a piece of cake, put it on a plate and gave it to his son. "OOh! What a lot!" said Jake, passing it to his brother Sam. "That's not Sam's, that's yours," said Father. "OOh! What a little!"

We always laughed, appreciating his telling, and our own measuring temporarily stopped. To our dismay it reappeared in our own children and my husband and I would glance at each other ruefully, aware that each child had an inbuilt register whose tallying was active and ongoing. How thankful we are that, now as adults, this has subsided for them. How horrified I then became when I realised that I was enmeshed within my earlier metaphor of measurement.

The enmeshment began when I started to write to you my co-researchers, my friends, and for ease of writing and with no matronizing meaning, I call you my moms. I started to wonder how it would feel for you Lena, if your letter was thirty pages and Caroline's was fifty-four? And what if the letter to Louise was only twenty-five pages? Would she wonder whether I cared less or thought less of her story than of Joan's? And then I started imagining whose letter would be first and whose last and what that would mean to each of you. And then I started giggling at the utter absurdity of my thoughts as I realised, simultaneously, the tension created by the insidiousness of the tally. I shall now measure only those things it makes sense to measure, at any given time and in any given context. Without sounding naive, I know when I am hot, or when I ought to wear my tuque, without recording and measuring aids. And like my dear mother-in-law's cooking, I throw flour, spices, and herbs together with seasoned abandon, somewhat recklessly but nearly always successfully.

I often refer to you as my moms. I do it sincerely and want to assure you that no matronizing meaning is intended. When we speak together it feels comfortable. You have all, at different times, told me so; and I feel it in my bones. And it's hard to believe that it will soon be twelve months that we have been involved together. Over this period we have met, face-to-face, for about twenty-four hours, spoken on the telephone for another two hours, and written notes to each other back and forth about three times. How's that for measurement! Should I add that I have typed five-hundred and fifty-seven pages of transcribed tapes? It speaks little to the quality of our dialogue and less to the energy and effort of our uncoverings. At our next meeting I want to read to you some of the letters that I have written. There may be further meetings and I am concerned about the amount of time that I am asking you to spend. I wonder whether it is much more than you anticipated. Then I recall that I had mentioned that I would keep coming back, sharing and replaying our words together, and that you had all felt comfortable.

some of the words are kept here: they surround me

I am unable to explain, even to myself, why I prefer jotting my thoughts on materials of different hues and texture. I have scribed variously on a white dry-board using primary colored pens, on spaces offered from the world of "flyers," and on magically colored Post-it notes, stuck precariously on the wall above my desk. Sometimes the Post-it notes glide gracefully down, their stickiness diminished by the heat from my desk lamp. I wonder whether this is a portent, an evaluation of the worthiness of the written thought? I brush that thought away rigorously and remember telling you about the scraps of paper tucked away and the unwritten ideas that became as fugitive as those elusive names writ deep but unwilling to be recalled when summoned imperiously. Why didn't I write it instead of saying it, and why not write the ideas in one place?

This morning I read some Grumet (1990). She has said it all. She arrived before me and has written my thoughts! Had I never read the article this morning I would have written unaware. What bliss! But what of plagiary? If ignorance of the law is no excuse, does the same apply to writing? This is what Grumet says:

> It is fashionable these days to view all writing as the imprint of some cultural behemoth, striding through consciousness, literature or criticism towards a compelling, if undetermined, destination. According to this deconstruction we, scribbling in our diaries, or squinting at our word processors, merely imagine that we are composing the original word that brings a new thought to expression. All language is social, all thought historical, all form predetermined, all invention sabotaged...Nevertheless, I still write...I have read that Virginia Woolf left jottings everywhere. At times I have toyed with that possibility, for there are few attributes of hers that I can appropriate to my own identity other than her writing habits. But this scatter method has never worked for me. I lose the jottings, crumble them up and throw them away in a clean sweep of tidying or use their backs and margins for telephone numbers which then get tucked into secret places where they won't be lost and from which they can never be recovered...So you see, it (writing) is both things: inner and outer, personal and public, spontaneous and considered, mind and body (p. 321).

I am heartened by her words and, despite the irregularities of my reflective recordings, I have kept a journal intermittently during the last twelve months, often squinting and scribbling. This is one of the entries that I'm glad that I contained within my notebook for, on re-reading, the pattern for my narrative was adumbrated.

> Yesterday, June the twenty-sixth, nineteen ninety four, it poured with rain in the afternoon. My hair frizzed upwards and my sandaled feet were cold and wet as I crossed the grass. The rising smoke led me to my destination. Voices murmured and metal garbage cans clanged as the potters bustled efficiently between cans and kiln and blackened slats. Baseball hats and smoke-repellant masks hid all but eyes, and bodies, covered with protective clothing of ranging hues, were in constant motion. Fragile and glowing, the fired pots were lifted with pincers from the kiln and were placed in cans. Tamped with leaves and sawdust, they were quickly covered to take their place in a smouldering heat. Frenetic water spraying, essential to the process, transformed the pieces. Soft excited sounds from smiling lips breathed wonderingly as wide eyes witnessed emergent glazes. Patterns and designs that had been brushed, pressed, or transferred in less conventional ways, enthralled the group.

With its metaphor of discovery and revelation, the raku workshop brought my own batik days and nights into immediate focus. I had found the metaphor helpful when I had tried to articulate my hope for our work. My unexpected participation in the excitement of the kiln's disclosures, and the incandescent passion of both pots and potters reinforced not only my aspirations for the future but a concept of transformation. For I have been transformed through our relationship with all its prismatic and chimeric reflections.

"no textual staging is ever innocent (including this one)," Laurel Richardson

Just as I do not know whether this informal style of writing will be frowned upon, I also do not know whether excerpts from newspapers are acceptable in a doctoral dissertation. Do the New York Times or the Guardian from England have a special respectability accorded them? I suspect they do and I would not affront our mutual sensibilities by quoting from The Sun even though I read parts of it. You have already read snippets from the Globe and Mail, considered by most to have a "good style" and I will comment on the style of writing that I have chosen. I discuss my liberal use of metaphor in another letter and tell how helpful I have found it to be for sorting out complexities. Initially I was apprehensive and wondered whether its use and my style would be acceptable to my dissertation committee. Richardson (1994) discusses writing conventions within their historical context and reminds us that they are "neither fixed nor neutral" but, like us all, they are children of their time, held in the sway of the "shifting domination of particular schools" and models.

She tells that in our present century the relationship between writing in science and the humanities has been one of "crossovers - uneasy and easy, denied and acknowledged" and that it is made clear through analyses: "how all disciplines have their own set of literary devices and rhetorical appeals, such as probability tables, archival records, and first person accounts" (p. 519). The more I thought about my use of metaphor the more I realised that, through it, I was coming to understand and know things that had seemed previously inaccessible.

> ...writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of "knowing" - a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in

> different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable (Richardson, 1994, p. 516).

The caution commended to research inquirers by Geertz (1988) must also be mine. Clandinin and Connelly describe it thus:

> the dilemma of how lively our signature should be: Too vivid a signature runs the risk of obscuring the field and its participants; too subtle a signature runs the risk of deception that the research text speaks from the point of view of the participant (1994, p. 424).

I am again reminded of myself as tight-rope walker balancing - with great care - through this narrative, advancing with the avowal that our signatures shall be scribed both separately and collectively, joining in calligraphic patterns of complexity yet engraving our individual design when fashioning our own coda. Thus shall our voices be heard.

bathed in relationships, links taut and tenuous

"We think back through our mothers if we are women" (Woolf, 1929). I join her, adding, we also think back through our teachers if we are students and through our students if we are teachers. And I think all of those ways, forward and backward, and past, present and future, sometimes vertically and sometimes horizontally. I am reminded of Bruner when he speaks of "looking sidewise".

> It is an approach whose medium of exchange seems to be the metaphor paid out by the left hand. It is a way that grows happy hunches and "lucky" guesses, that is stirred into connective activity by the poet and the necromancer looking sidewise rather than directly. Their hunches and intuitions generate a grammar of their own -

> searching out connections, suggesting similarities, weaving ideas loosely in a trial web (1962, p. 4).

At times, as in a maze, my thinking has led to blocked alleyways and I retrace my thoughts, stepping carefully over obstructions and intrusions. As I track my steps I continue with the thought of wanting and needing to acknowledge all who are part of my narrative. I want to highlight them, not on a separate page slipped in as a convention but, as intrinsic to these letters so that you can know them too. For in my storying and restorying they are all there. And they are you, my friends in the Centre for Research and Teacher Education and Development and from its "kitchen table." It is here that energy and excitement is released through shared ideas, questions, and experiences. Charles relates his shaggy dog stories (which often do have a point that is pertinent to the discussion) in a voice reminiscent of W.O. Mitchell with its Prairie drawl. We laugh, or groan humorously. Lynda, my longtime friend, brings her enquiries with a penetrating vision and Linda, my newfound friend, who writes magic with words, alerts me to their seduction. For me, both Lindas have been like Aladdin's genie, opening and exploring new vistas. Brian's courage and dignity, Hedy's wide awareness, Jan's quiet, Karyn's sensitivity, Ann's understanding of presence, Elaine's questions, Betty's video, Christina's slides, Ian's paintings, Ji-Sook's gentleness, Annie's humour and Sherilyn's comfort, all have joined in creating a safe place for student learning.

This Centre, with its atmosphere of inspiration, collaboration, emotional and intellectual generosity, compassion and freedom, is the creation of Professor D.Jean Clandinin and, like many before me, without her my own stories would never have been written. She has transformed my life. Thank you,Jean, for your contribution as a committee member, and for your guidance. To all my committee members, I offer my sincere gratitude: To my Supervisor, Dr. George Fitzsimmons for his acceptance, patience and, throughout, his assistance and belief in me; to Dr. Fern Snart for her validation, friendship and willingness to share and listen; to Dr. Caroline Yewchuk for her thoughtful comments and for being the chairperson at my candidacy and my final examination; to Dr. Harvey Zingle, for being willing to take time from his duties as Dean to listen and offer his responses; and to Dr. William Ayers for agreeing to act as my External Examiner. Dr. Ayers, your questions enriched the conversations. Dr. Florence McKie, my friend and colleague, has long been my "sounding-board" and has helped me extend my thinking.

I have been sustained, throughout the years, by the friendship and assistance of all who work in the Herbert Coutts library; I thank you sincerely.

Azriel, my friend and partner, and our adult children, Rachel and Tom, Joel and Dov, are my constant supports through rough and easy times. They have listened and added their "two bits" at the right moments. I rejoice in their independence and forthrightness, past, present, and future. Without them and without you, Caroline, Louisa, Lena and Joan, this thesis would not be in your hands today. I thank you all.

I wrote earlier of the serendipitous nature of the complexion of my research. I emphasize complexion and mention its ephemeral quality as I try to make the connections. I do this to contrast the meaning I gave to stories I had been told which will never leave me and I used my own experience of creating fabrics to provide that connection. As I retell it I realise that the ephemeral and the permanent are contained within the same metaphor: A once deep-fry cooker bubbles with the heady smell of cornauba wax as dyes, brushes, pebbles, and tools tempt my hands. I create batik and tie-dye yardage, five, eight yards at a time. The pristine white cotton waits expectantly. I tjant and tie and brush and dye and crackle the wax, surprising it. My red, blue and purple hands dance together, immersing the fabric into battered galvanized buckets. I watch the dyes swirl and seep. I am transfixed as shapes appear delicately and subtly. Untying the string and removing the pebbles I breathe tentatively, until gradually the whole is revealed, textured and toned in vibrant hues.

I have spoken and will continue to speak of my hope for my research, that the whole will be revealed, textured and toned. Months ago I wrote: For within my curricular context there exist stories that have stained my being with the tenacity of aniline dye. The words haunt me daily and I wonder, ought I, as the memory of immersing a copper-plate landscape into an acid bath resurfaced, to have written "and etched into my soul?" Both metaphors reflect accurately the power of stories I have heard, the stories that must be heard both in the mainstream and on the outskirts of the legitimated communities for, in the former their hearing can be educative, and in the latter transformative.

yet another connection by degrees

I referred to a movie whose words and images stirred me profoundly and was alerted to yet another connection. In Six Degrees of Separation (MGM, 1993) the author makes the point that we are connected in ways closer than we realise and that it takes only a few contacts to connect seemingly disparate lives. Within each of these connections the kernels of relationships grow. The lead actress is a mother who was forced to face her living and the meaning she had given to her life-style and relationships. Mrs. Kitteridge and her husband had believed a young imposter when he had told them he was the son of a movie star and that he knew their children from having been a student at Harvard. He had repeated the confidence trick with friends of theirs and the movie plot involves their telling and retelling of the "story" as well as some of its devastating consequences. She says in anguished tones: "How do we fit it (experience) into life without it being an anecdote; when it was an experience. How do we keep it an experience?"

In the Concise Oxford Dictionary "anecdote" is defined as: "Narrative of detached incident," whereas in the Oxford Universal Dictionary the definition reads: "The narrative of an interesting or striking event." I took the former definition when interpreting her partner's response. Her husband, Mr. Kitteridge, who, earlier, had intellectualized his response to their experience by using an analogy from painting, chose the Expressionist artist Kandinsky's words: "It is clear that the choice of object, that is one of the elements in the harmony of form, must be decided only by the corresponding vibration in the human soul." Mr. Kitteridge, when distancing himself once more from the painful experience of ambivalence and betrayal in relationships, spoke of structure, contrasting it with the formlessness of a collage. Speaking with the voice of the painter Cézanne he made the point: "That's why I like painting. Because of its structure." At the end of the movie he renounces "the corresponding vibrations" in his soul, denying the deeply moving experience which he had earlier acknowledged.

His storying and restorying of the experience was bounded not only by his history but by the political and ideological mores of his minority culture, that of the moneyed cognoscenti and literati, and it became a narrative of a "detached' incident." In his oft-repeated telling of the tale he was able to reduce the pain he had previously revealed, by giving no voice to those parts of the anecdote that disclosed the vulnerability of his relationships. Was this, for him, "something we might call epistemological silence? (This is) the kind of silence we are confronted with when we face the unspeakable" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 113). In her deep torment, Mrs. Kitteridge had trivialized the meaning of anecdote and detached it from its connection with experience reducing it to the equivalence of an oft-heared phrase frequently presented in disparaging tone, "it's merely anecdotal evidence" or, the equally dismissive "that's just a story." Van Manen explains that the value of anecdotes lies not for "factual-empirical or factual-historical reasons...An historical account describes a thing that has happened in the past, but an anecdote is rather like a poetic narrative which describes a universal truth" (1990, p. 119). Van Manen elaborates the complexity of this dialectic:

> The paradoxical thing about anecdotal narrative is that it tells something *particular* while really addressing the *general* or the *universal*... And vice versa, [as] at the hand of anecdote fundamental insights or truths are tested for their value in the contingent world of everyday experience. And so one may say that the anecdote shares a fundamental epistemological or methodological feature with phenomenological human science which also operates in the tension between particularity and universality (op.cit., p. 120).

coherence and "keeping at it"

This, then, is why I chose a narrative inquiry as the method for my research. The quotation from Van Manen speaks to me forcibly and, with the tension he describes, the image of myself as tight-rope walker is reinforced. The image has been with me throughout these letters, for it is indeed a balancing act with its weighing of words and ideas, its hope to reveal your truths and mine, its complexities of interpretation, and its overall need for narrative coherence.

> Coherence seems to be a need imposed on us whether we seek it or not. Things need to make sense. We feel the lack of sense when it goes missing. The unity of self, not as an underlying identity but as a life that hangs together, is not a pre-given condition but an achievement. Some of us succeed, it seems, better than others. None of us succeeds totally. We keep at it. What we are doing is telling and retelling, to ourselves and others, the story of what we are about and what we are (Carr, 1986, p. 97).

As I read those words I feel encouraged by them. I think of all the things you've told me and of my own stories too. Carr's words provide a message of hope and reaching out. Even if our life doesn't hang together, "we keep at it." And I think of the times that you've all "kept at it," with courage and perseverance, despite the attendant pain. Linda Smith speaks of the poet and author Annie Dillard's words: "We find pain not at the periphery of our lives but at the 'centre of human experience' " (Smith, 1991). That centre of human experience is what we were trying to uncover together when you spoke of your lives. I think that you, in a narrative search for coherence, were concerned "with the question how to live one's life as a whole, and with questions about the nature of individual human existence, character, and personal identity" (Carr, p. 73).

"How do we keep it an experience?" Mrs. Kitteridge's plaint re-enters my thoughts as did Lorde's friend Clem's voice enter hers, "coming back to me through the dimness of thirty years."

> "I see you coming here trying to make sense where there is no sense. Try just living it. Respond, alter, see what happens." I thought of the African way of perceiving life, as experience to be lived rather than a problem to be solved (1988, p. 116).

I realise that this is a pretty serious way to end a letter, isn't it? But our mission together is serious. We all want to know more, as widely and deeply as we are able. We want to learn from each other and we want to share what we have learned with the large audience of those relating to children and mothers and their families.

Sincerely,
Joy-Ruth

Your beginnings

April/May/June/October 1994

Dear Mothers,

We did not consciously explore together the influences of your own families on you and your living, and on your own constructed scripts and conceptions of "what a family should be" or "what a family could be." I did not say "tell me how what happened, while you were growing up in your family, influenced you," but in your tellings it all flowed out. The image of a river, beginning its life as a bubbling brook, gathering momentum on its journey, sometimes "rushing and gushing" like the Cataracts of Lodore and at others, "rolling along like Old Mother Thames," parallels the rhythm, the tidal surges, the ebb and flow of your lives. You had commented, Louisa, "each wave a new idea." And we'll share them in this letter, the waves and influences that you lived with, and those that you experienced and interpreted as present for your sons.

I have been sitting at my keyboard for over two hours trying to present your words in your voice, the words which tell the story of your early life, Caroline. I realise that the difficulty that I am having is because it is so important to me that what I write feels right. For me, this means that the clarity of my writing is such that when the you whom I met and the story that you shared appear on these pages they are congruent both with you and for you. I recall what I wrote earlier about verbal pomposity, which I want to avoid, and I know that it would help just to begin. But how to tell it, ethically and morally, so that our uncovered truths, meanings, and realities, are not merely templates of your life, and all our lives, but ring with the primordial quality of the original?

more than loneliness

Your early story, Caroline, of isolation and the frightening feeling of having been left completely alone in a locked apartment, as well as the constant shifting of dwelling-places, has left you with a strong antipathy to further moves and an equally strong desire to put down roots: “I don’t like to be uprooted,” you told me. Caroline, you and my youngest son are the same age and when you first told me so I gave myself a mental shake. We had already spoken of the many profoundly traumatic events in your life and I made comparisons that initially felt inevitable, such as the contrast between nurtured and isolated early lives and sheltered and exposed experiences. But when I came to reflect more deeply I knew that my son’s experience of violence and death and emotional turmoil, situated not only in the context of the concentration camps of Europe when he voyaged there but in his own living, was as politically, historically, and socially influenced as was yours, for your life as a young girl and as a young wife was circumscribed by them all.

I’ve read and re-read the transcripts of our times together and ‘I’ve listened and re-listened to the original tapes, and each time that I do I am aware of my physical reactions. When I think of your experiences my pulse quickens, my lips tighten, my throat feels constricted and my heart feels heavy. Then, when you tell me of your thoughts and of some of the things that you have done to help you construct a different reality, I feel like a high school cheerleader shaking brightly colored pom-poms and jumping and shouting encouraging from the sidelines: “Way to go, Caroline!” This is not meant to be a superficial or frivolous response, my message is meant seriously, and it’s the me of now who supports you in your courage and efforts to understand and change the plot line of your story.

Your childhood was a lonely one and you said that, in talking with a counsellor who "really" listened, you have come to understand some of its effects:

> But I was left alone a lot when I was younger. Both my parents worked all the time. But you know my dad was very strict...Growing, that I do remember a lot. Being alone all the time. And you know, I remember it so clearly in this apartment, we lived in a high rise, I remember the loneliness, how I'd feel when they'd leave in the morning for work. And then I'd be wide awake, and I'd be up all day...and all alone.
>
> And then out of that conversation she picked up that I also don't like moving a lot. I don't like to be uprooted a lot...'cos I do hate moving and I couldn't really understand why...And it was always apartments and highrises and stuff like that. And I was always left alone.

This included the nights as well as the days, and you were a mere five years old. You told how you would creep toward the sliver of light that pierced the blackness. It came from the apartment door that led into the hallway. The door was chained and offered no exit and you would tip-toe back to your room fearful of making a sound that could disturb the frightening quiet.

The chain on the door reminded me of the rope tied around the door knob that you discovered years later:

> Oh yeah, and I came home and there was no Bob and so I went upstairs and he had them tied down to the crib. Ryan was almost a year and Roger was just under two. They were still breathing and he had the doors tied shut....He had a rope around the

> door knob and he pulled it tight. And the bedrooms were like this and here there was a railing all along and then the stairs went down like that and he tied the rope to the railing. So I untied this and I couldn't believe my eyes 'cos both the boys were in the house by themselves (And er were they crying?) Yeah. Oh yeah. I don't know how long it had been going on.

We spent time wondering together how much you thought the boys remembered their early years:

> Er, he doesn't remember that. And er because there were a number of times when I thought during that time oh he'll be too young to remember.

Opinions vary widely about memory and our ability to recall events and the debate is argued fiercely from all bands of the spectrum of psychological theories. Currently the False Memory Syndrome is gaining a populist front and, it is said, memories are being placed in people's minds by therapists' suggestions (Yapko, 1994). When I think of your experience of violence to your self and your children I continue wondering, as do you, how they will tell their story?

> And er, it started...yeah I could see the anger. You know, when Roger would cry and stuff, he'd be "Oh. Leave him! Jesus Christ!" and er then one time my mom, she was having a rest on the couch and Roger started crying and he (Bob) thought my mom was asleep but she woke up because he was crying but Bob didn't know she did. And my mom said he had Roger's head in a pillow and he was trying to suffocate him. And Roger was only three or four weeks old...There was one time he picked me up at my mother's and I had Roger and we were in the car. And I had Roger between me and him er you know he was hitting me pretty badly in the car

> and a lady walked down by the sidewalk and Bob didn't see but three cars behind there was a police car. So the lady walked on by and tapped on the window and she said, "Excuse me but three cars down in a blue car there's a lady being beat on." So the cop came to the window. And Bob had hit me pretty badly and all the side of my face...and I couldn't even talk and I don't know if he knocked my jaw out of place I think 'cos I couldn't talk. No matter how much I tried.

Your loneliness and isolation continued, with all its attendant stressors:

> It's funny, like a part of you keeps saying: "This is not right, you know, get out of this, get out of this marriage." And then I'd always think: "No. It's going to get better"...So from there on he'd always try and convince me that I was too much of a worry. That I worried too much or that I imagined things... "You're always imagining things, it's not that bad."

Your experiences within your marriage, and your feelings about them, are echoed across Canada (Cottrell, 1994). There are countless reasons why relationships, within which violence occurs, continue. But you knew that you had to leave and so you slowly started packing:

> And he'd ask me: "Well why are you doing this?" and I said: "I have to get out of here else" I said: "Bob I hate you." He said: "What?" I said: "I'm leaving." He was surprised. He didn't think I was going to do it...He said: "Oh no! You don't have the guts to do that." And I said: "You just watch."

You left. The world applauds you.

Loneliness, isolation and turbulence are echoed in your experience of childhood, Louisa, and, at some time during our second meeting, you remarked: "You see, I was the only daughter, and I was on my own." While reading and re-reading the transcripts of our conversations, I would write comments and my own responses to your words, and beside those words of yours I had written: "Were you lonely as a child? Tell me a bit about your own childhood memories if you'd care to," and you wrote back your reply telling me about the vagueness of your childhood memories prior to your early teen years:

> It was a scary, insecure home. My father was an alcoholic and abused my Mom...I was lonely at times because I never knew anyone whose home was as chaotic as my own.

Your security came later and left its imprint. In March 1994, you told me about your Mom's proposed visit and some weeks later, over a cup of tea, you shared with me how it had been for you both. The warmth and caring that you feel for her glowed through your descriptions of the time you spent together and reminded me of your earlier words:

> My Mom was as solid as a rock. We (you and your younger brother) were loved unconditionally always. That is what I remember most. My teen years were great, Dad left when I was thirteen. Our home became serene.

Serenity and calmness need the ingredients of ritual and response. I am not proposing a life like *blanc-mange*, that bland and tasteless pudding of my childhood dinners. I believe that in our living the experiences on peaks and in depths are important to our growing, enable our potential and point and poise us for uncertainties. I often found *blanc-mange* reassuring by its very blandness and familiarity but would not choose it for a steady diet. Yet I re-live tales told me by young and older folk who sought non-sterile stability, having lived through chaos and turbulence, and cherished what you were able to embrace during your adolescence, Louisa - a home that contrasted with those previous years - and had become serene.

Serenity was not a part of the growing years you described, Joan, with its arguments and physical fights creating turmoil and fixing tension. Your parents married when they were seventeen and eighteen and you were born when your mom was eighteen:

> And they both went wild to a certain extent. They both started going in opposite directions. They were fighting for their youth and for their freedom and what they were missing, and er it tore them apart, it tore the family apart, it tore us apart.

There were other disruptions to the longed for balm of careless and carefree youthful days:

> And again, I've always felt this thing back to you know, back to a child, because I really felt somebody's got to take charge of this family because the ones who're supposed to can't look after themselves. And they really couldn't at that time. And er, so yes, at twelve years old I was the mom in a lot of ways. My mother would be very angry in a lot of ways if she heard that. But it's...it's very true. I took over er watching, looking after my mother. Making sure she didn't do silly things and looking after my brother...Her mood swings have been very very intense. When they...when my parents separated for the last time I was, I guess I was about fifteen, and we pretty much knew that this would be the end one, she was very, was very depressed. And she started drinking rum which doesn't sit well with her, and er, because she was depressed she was on Valium and that kind of thing. And I found that um, you know, it was not something that kids, that us as children should have been around, caught up in their lives, but we were, and I would be

> afraid to leave the house.

Say "Dick and Jane" and most of us over thirty-five know what the implication is. Add "Spot" and we become absolutely sure. The names carry with them a picture of perfection. A picture that glossed over the reality of everyday life for countless other names. You used it, Lena, to describe your early years. Did you wonder then whether you would play out this romantic ideal in your own life?

> Hoh! I laugh! I always call it a Dick and Jane upbringing. You know (and then a hearty laugh underscored your initial words), very nice, sort of upper middle class and, you know, dad worked, mom stayed home and had a cleaning lady. Very nice, you know. Very ordinary that way, no problems or hang-ups.

I felt a sharp intake of my own breath as you used the word "ordinary" and reflected on that later in my journal. The movie "Ordinary People" painfully yet skillfully showed the particularity, the idiocyncracity, of a family where the mother strove desperately to maintain the veneer of ordinariness, unable to grieve (outwardly) her eldest son's death nor acknowledge the silent suffering of the younger. Since the time that I read the book and, later, saw the movie, the word "ordinary" has held me in its thrall. I worry about it, attack it, tease it like a puppy with a slipper; I associate it with all the "taken for granted" ideas about life and living and the "typifications" that Berger and Luckman (1964) say we use to objectify our realities.

We did not discuss "ordinary" then, for you continued: "So I had in my mind a pretty clear idea of how I wanted my family to be at that point." As you had already shared with me the eventual demise of your "clear idea" the words "at that point" were poignant for me but temporarily. Was the possibility of an ordinary life and its attendant safety being regretted? I think not. Your use of those words, "at that point," suggests to me that you realized that that was the you of then and in your telling this was the you of now. For, from our later conversations, I believed that, despite the difficulties and complexities that have tousled the texture of your life, its trajectory entered a course that would eventually lead to freedom.

I imagine your reply Lena: "Boy if this is what you think freedom is Ruth, come and share it and see what it feels like!" And I realise that my use of the word freedom in the context of a trajectory and a course may be puzzling, and trust that my explanation will bring clarity. I owe my understanding of its meaning within this context to the educational philosopher Greene and her book "The Dialectic of Freedom" (1988). As Gowin writes in the Foreward: "It is a book based on social imagination, speculative audacity, and intimations of power over our futures" (p.ix). I would like to combine the word "psychological" with "social" thereby composing the phrase social and psychological imagination. I believe, Lena, that you have added successfully these four creative responses to your *modus vivendi*, your way of being in the world.

I have no wish to paraphrase Greene's words, for I have found, as have so many before me, her writing to be splendidly succinct and illuminating. She alludes to what I have referred to above, the tendency to objectify, to separate ourselves as subjects, and by so doing "to sacrifice the possibility of becoming the 'author' of one's world; and the consciousness of authorship has much to do with the consciousness of freedom" (p. 22).

> To be aware of authorship is to be aware of situationality and of the relation

> between the ways in which one interprets one's situation and the possibilities of action and of choice. This means that one's "reality," rather than being fixed or predefined, is a perpetual emergent, becoming increasingly multiplex, as more perspectives are taken, more texts are open, more friendships are made (p. 23).

Greene acknowledges that hers is not the first book to "try to reawaken the consciousness of possibility." Her vision "brings together the need for wide-awakeness with the hunger for community, the desire to know with the wish to understand, the desire to see with the passion to feel" (p. 23). She addresses educators and with a broad sweep of my word-brush I address us all. I find it hard to separate mothers as teachers and teachers as mothers, my perplexity continues when my vision focuses on student as teacher and teacher as student. Of course I am not alone with these thoughts and through this narrative I hope that I will be able to convince us all of the power, possibilities and importance of mothers' practical knowledge and create a path for its inclusion into the lives of schools and professionals.

Your knowing is so intimately bound with all these influences, occuring as they do in relationships with family, with professionals in and out of schools, and with institutions, that my expressed hope for coherence within this narrative may need the leap of faith to which I have previously referred. For the rhythm of the influences is felt throughout your lives and the waves may start in one letter, reach a crescendo in the next, and recede on their ebb in the letter that follows, leaving but a rippled imprint in the sediment.

Your telling, Lena, of Oliver's daily life as a toddler, with the inconsistencies that you realised contributed to his uncertainty, remind us that the serenity of which we spoke earlier, was problematic for him. You were working full-time in a demanding position as an administrator and, as your husband was "often unemployed," he was "more the home caretaker" for Oliver's pre-school years:

> ...so in a lot of ways that kind of led into some patterns, in the way that he was his dad's pal, you know, little shadow. So he was always going off with his dad...his dad, at that point, wasn't particularly structured or disciplinary in that role. It was more: "Oh. Isn't he cute, my little boy."

The difficulties of which you were aware, and which did result in some "disagreements," concerned the way your husband disciplined the children:

> I found that his father was very much: "Yeh! Lie on the couch kids. Kick around and play." I'd come home and there'd be dishes and stuff everywhere and then all of a sudden if he said: "Be quiet!" or something, and they didn't, it was: "All right! Everybody up! Clear!"

I jumped, as you used his loud shout and stern voice to give that castigation. You continued:

> And there was nothing in-between. He was either a kid with them or this strict disciplinarian and nothing in-between...as I say, this more or less, eternal child, perpetual child.

As the children started growing up you began to "realise that they were more mature than their dad."

When Oliver was in kindergarten you and your husband "split up." You said that you saw things differently and those differences were critical:

> And like I say in terms of that, just as far as like the psychological background for him, it wasn't, it hadn't been like there was a huge amount of fighting or screaming, you know, leading up to it, And you know, there wasn't alcohol or abuse, or any of those really traumatic things.

The "split", however, was traumatic for you all, and "that upset Oliver terribly ...Mommy, mommy, why can't he come back? You know he wants to come back."

You knew then, and continue to know, what difference a sense of community can bring to family life. You and your female neighbours joined in conviviality and conversations, gnawing away at things that were bothersome and releasing the Triton and minnows of daily living. You described your neighbours' husbands as "Oliver's male models," and from your descriptions, I too, felt their interest and support for you all: Dan's fishing and camping trips with his son and Oliver; Mark's sharing of his telescope, computer skills, and inventions:

> So Oliver had a lot of male friends and a lot of other ideas as to how a marriage should be and how a dad should be as far as playing with kids, and also able to say, like, "finish your plate," without being threatening.

You and I discussed how fortunate the family was to have, not only the supportive community around you to enable these opportunities, but an extended family, especially your own father who was active with Oliver. You had expressed your position to him:

"I've made a decision and I think that it's healthier for all of us," but Oliver "really struck out emotionally and verbally at me." I remember saying: "It's tough isn't it? We often make decisions from our grown-up stance that we feel are right for us at the time, and our young children, having a different picture and different needs, have difficulty accepting those decisions." I told of many a youngster I had met who, when asked about the things that would make a difference for them, would reply: "Everything would be alright if my mom and dad would get together again," and this despite confirmed violence and abuse. It startles us sometimes, as adults, until we ponder the nuances of relationships and living.

When his father expostulated: "Well I don't see why they (the school) are making such a big fuss about him. It's just the way I was and it's just the way I am now," your belief was:

> a lot with Oliver, he came by it naturally, genetically. I grew up with my brother, and my brother was like that a lot....So did his dad. His dad still is. I think that his dad still is an adult ADD.

Then: "sometimes I could see the look on Oliver's face and it was 'Oh my god! Am I going to turn out like him' or 'Oh! Maybe I will take my pills.' You told me "part ofhim, occasionally he would actualiy even verbalize it, 'I'm afraid I'm going to turn out just like him' ". When you asked him how he thought he would be if he turned out like his dad his reply was "just that he would be lazy and bad."

the issue of bonding

Returning to work when Nate was four months was very hard: "that was very difficult. I had a very bad time" and you continued to blame yourself, Louisa, for your working during the first two years of his life. We tried to understand together, the meaning of that feeling of blame, and you thought that, in part, its influence came from some of the books that you had read about chidren's upbringing:

> ...it's got to do with the bonding issue, mother and child, and how, when the child is left at an early age, that bonding is interrupted....and er...I...I think that's where my big hang-up is...that's where it's at. And in my heart I've always felt that's where things happened for Nate.

Opinions and perspectives about bonding vary. Weiss, (1994) in speaking of parenthood and its "poetics," which she names as the myth of bonding and "motherly love," believes that it is anything but "natural." Rather "it is constructed through a matrix of images, meanings, sentiments and practices that are everywhere socially and culturally produced" (p. ix). Weiss acknowledges that a realization of connection between an infant and its mother can and does occur but does not agree with its being defined as natural or motherly:

> "Motherly love" is one of the most prominent commonplace expressions found behind the ideology of bonding. The two are, in fact, mutually dependent; if "motherly love" is uncritically accepted, then "bonding" necessarily follows. However, while "bonding" has lent itself to "scientific" definition in the discourse of psychology, ethnology and obstetrics, "motherly love" has remained beyond the reach of scientific analysis (xi).

Weiss states that despite the "uncritical" acceptance of the assumptions about bonding and its "universal existence," the scientific evidence is flawed.

An historical overview on "Motherhood and the Ideology of Care" is given by Polakow

(1993) as a critical introduction to her research and writing about the poverty of single mothers. She also debunks the myth of bonding:

> Bowlby portrays mother-child attachment in suffocating images of reciprocal development, in which bonding is recast as mother bondage. Mental health can only be assured by exclusive maternal care conducted within a nuclear family structure in which the strict division of male/female roles forms part of the natural order. Other family forms and child care settings become potential landscapes of pathology (p. 37).

Reading books which present opposing viewpoints and conclusions calls into question our responses. You have those feelings of guilt, Louisa, and they are painful and real for you. As a "mature" student in the fifties I, too, was taught the "maternal attachment" theories of Bowlby; no dissenting positions were given as they were not then available but, at that time, I did not think that "motherly" feelings were natural or instinctual, nor do I now. Those feelings are influenced by a multitude of variables and having a youngster whose behaviours we find difficult is one of them.

You and I discussed the qualitative aspect of time spent with children, contrasting it with merely adding the number of minutes or hours spent, and your descriptions of Nate's contentment at going off to the babysitter. Despite his apparent contentment, his difficult behaviours, primarily balkiness and refusal to do things that you asked him, increased, as did your guilt and self-blame, fuelled by remarks from professionals. I had commented in my note to you about the frightening aspects of some of the messages that we get from experts and you had written back: "We definitely need to sift through it." Sifting through is not easy is it? You had to relinquish some of the work of mothering that you had been doing and this was not easy for you, even though it provided you with relief from numerous daily upsets. When he was placed in a group home:

> ...they took him out at night and it was out in the country. And you go down this road where there's trees and it's all black and I thought: "This kid thinks he's on the moon, you know." And I was afraid that he must...I was afraid that he would feel like he was really abandoned and er,..that was my biggest fear at that point.

However, it was here that you met other parents, regularly, and in helpful conversations; this was a "first" in your twelve years of living with your unique son and, as well as feeling supported by some of the professionals there, your regular contacts and relationships with the other parents relieved your isolation:

> So we went to this parents' group for a year and a half. So we were a close knit group of people. It was...it was for me an experience of my life, I think. One of my neatest experiences...

You have wondered a great deal about Nate's motivation:

> I think about all the people he's talked to and all the tests he's had, and all the analysing that he's gone through. And I hear other people saying this to him: "Oh. You like to push buttons don't you?" "Oh you like to figure people out" and "Oh. You like to manipulate." And that's what I hear him saying to me is what they've said to him. (and you're not so sure?) Well. I see him doing it though...and he admits to it. He says: "Yeh. That's what I like to do."

And then you added, slowly, thinking the while: "Or is this something that he's living up to though?"

That nurturing, growth-producing, and caring aspect of your being, Joan, had its early practice prior to your teen years, when, in the culture in which you grew, most of your peers were enjoying more carefree explorations of childhood. You have acknowledged and dealt with your residual resentment. Did those years foster for you an independence? One which enabled you to break free from a husband who had become, until the last year you were together, "sort of a happy dumb drunk. Very unattractive!..His father drank too much and there was a lot of yelling in the home because I couldn't deal with it." Lloyd was four years old when you told his father to leave:

> because I was not going to raise a son who saw that lack of respect, towards women, as his role model...because I felt I had an obligation to make him a good man someday...er to raise him, you know...I didn't want to raise two children and I didn't feel that the example was good for the one that I had.

You did not want to influence negatively his feelings nor his relationship with his father; you tried to tell it "like it was."

> I tried to simplify it because it's a deep concept (for a four-year old). I just, you know, I said that Mommy and Daddy don't make each other happy any more. Mommy can't raise a child around alcohol. And I said Daddy is not a bad man...but I also took ownership too.

Lloyd's relationship with his father has continued and, as alcohol is no longer an issue, the activities on their regular weekends and the holidays they spend together, as well as the interest he takes in Lloyd's schooling, have been supportive to you and nurturing for Lloyd.

You felt that it was in kindergarten where harm occured:

> He's very bright but I think we have yet to see the true potential because he lost all of kindergarten. And er did some self-esteem, there was some self-esteem damage there, so I really felt that we had to spend some time making up for what was lost. The whole year was a write-off, and it was just a big...by the end of it it was just a dead...it was just punitive.

We returned to your story of that year at another time when I asked you whether the discrepancy between his apparent brightness and his difficulty with learning had been spoken of, and you responded:

> I mean they never really came out and said it...but I think that the understanding was that it was to be expected because of the disruptions in class. I mean if he's not settled to focus, he won't learn. So it was sort of hand-in-hand with the problems. Um. But you know really, what made me angry, was the fact that he does have very high intelligence. So because of that these children are more sensitive in some ways, because they're not stupid. They can perceive what's going on around them. And they know when they're being laughed at or discriminated against or whatever, and they feel it very intensely. And er they did a tremendous amount of self-esteem damage in kindergarten.

once more the measure

I believe that all children are sensitive to being laughed at or discriminated against, and this does indeed affect their feelings of self worth. You told of spending the last two years "making it up to him." When we meet children who have no confidence in themselves and their abilities we do try to "make it up" and help them feel that they can walk confidently into the world don't we? His difficulties with reading were, and continue to be, a worry for you and you're not sure whether it's because he's your "only" or whether "all children are like this." We discussed Lloyd's individuality further, for as Mrs. Malaprop, that notorious misuser of words in Sheridan's play "She Stoops to Conquer," cried: "All comparisons are odorous." Yes, their smell does waft under our noses at times, causing us to pull back. It seems we are conditioned by the trope of competition and of measuring ourselves against a statistical benchmark. "Oh! Your kid isn't walking yet and he's sixteen months? Mine walked at nine (months) and they're supposed to walk when they're a year." " My Ajay talks in whole sentences and he's only one-and-a-half." "Jim is reading at the eighth grade level and he's only at the beginning of grade five." What does it all mean? Does being on the "wrong" side of the Gaussian curve negate our humanity, our worthiness? I trust not for it can only mean that fifty percent of the world, give or take a few, is there, on the "wrong side of the tracks."

do we all sing the Sollies' song?

Your mission has been to help him grow and "of course, I want him to feel very secure and loved." My earlier story about the Sollies returned to me when I heard:

> And I find with kids like Lloyd, or maybe it's just Lloyd I don't know, he's always had an overwhelming need to be told several times a day, how much you love him.

> And he's, from the time he was two, you know: "You love me, Mommy, you love me Mommy?" and I never gave him any reason, ever, ever, to think that I certainly wouldn't. I've never left him alone, that kind of thing. And he always has, he's always saying, yeh, always asking me: "Do you love me, do you love me?" There's never an end.

"No matter how much they get, it's not enough" is the way you described the same phenomenon, Lena. I had watched Barbara Walters interviewing Elton John on her television show (1994) and I was telling you about his comments to her: He said: "I was craving for attention. I just wanted to be loved by both my parents. And my greatest fear was never being loved." When you showed me Oliver's early paintings and his beginning writing his messages were poignant. In his books and on his daily drawings his spidery formations read: "I love my Mom and Dad." "I love my Mom and Dad." "I love my Mom and Dad." This continued for many months. One day he had scrawled over the colored tag-paper: "LOVE. LOVE. LOVE. LOVE. LOVE." And on the days following his script read: "My Mom and Dad like me." "My Mom and Dad like me." "My Mom likes me." When the books and drawings came home "It just broke my heart."

Oliver's demands of you exacerbated your feelings of "frustration and hurt...You know, I've given up my career, I come to school every day, how much more can I give? He still doesn't think that I love him?" The incredulous tone in your voice, Lena, sought assurance, knowing that you have given more than just instrumentally. When he was younger the nightly cuddles after story-reading were part of the regular pattern. Now, as a young man soon to enter his teen years, "the playing says a lot." You told of your play-acting scenario where you entered your role with gusto:

> "You don't know how much love I've shown you." "Yeh," and then we just reached over, and actually I just kissed him on the cheek and he moved and we hit the lips and he went "Oh! We never kiss on the lips." And he went (and then you imitated an exaggerated wipe of the mouth) and off he went to play. So then he enjoys this and that's the way to get to him.

Many years ago in court a lawyer asked me loudly and assertively: "Tell me, Mrs. Mickelson, would you say this mother loves her children?" My reply slipped from my lips before I could stop it: "Love is a many splendoured thing." The muffled snorts of those present were not appreciated by others and I realised that I had wanted to startle complacencies. I continued to say that love can be shown in different ways and appears different depending on perspective. The mother's five children were being deemed neglected; their lives had been circumscribed by poverty. I had known the mom, had been with her and her children at different times and for different activities. I knew that she loved her children most (but not all) of the time and that there were other times when she did not like them at all. (They felt the same way about her.) She had been taught to say: "I still like you, I just don't like what you're doing," but, despite her saying it, her children found it hard to believe that she "really" did love them. Feelings about love are complex, as Cole Porter's twenties' song croons: "What is this thing called love?"

Roger finds it difficult to tell you how he's feeling, doesn't he Caroline?: "That's the problem with Roger, he's..he never was a big talker, for his feelings...because he's quiet. He was never really one to talk much." You spoke of the time your partner, Hank, tried to help Roger "open up" about how he was feeling, by saying: "I know it hurts you, doesn't it?" And Roger said "Yeh." That's how hard Roger is to talk to. You get a "Yeh, I know" out of Roger a lot. You don't get nothing more out of him. So Hank just sat with him for about an hour and talked to him and..." Empathic listening and talking is powerful, isn't it? I think that we know this from our experiences of listening, and of being heard:

> More than any individual message we will ever convey, it is the communication of our wish to hear the children and to have them hear us that they will feel and remember (Cotton, 1993, p. 88).

His being able to trust adults, especially males, has been surely and sorely tested. You will never know exactly what and how your ex-husband told him about the reason for his own incarceration except that "he told Roger in detail what he'd done...And Roger kind of left it at "Dad did something really bad." You were all coping with so much, especially the issue of trust, that when you and Hank became partners you were aware " it took Roger a long time to trust Hank." He was struggling with his divided loyalties: "It took Roger almost a year to even finally realize: 'Oh, well, maybe it's okay to like Hank and still like my Dad." You shared with me many of Roger's remarks that reflected his pride in Hank's achievement and self-discipline in overcoming his alcohol problem. Roger's caring for you has shown itself by his responsiveness to your need for relaxation and time out from the work of mothering: " Maybe you should go out for a bit, Mom...Well Hank, Mom's ...Mom's in the house all day. She needs to go out once in a while. Or else Mom's going to go nuts." Your sensing that the effects of his lived experience had sensitized him to your needs included our wondering about his "being protective of Mom" undertaking.

So many different parts of our lives brush against each other, don't they? And they're not static or frozen, they come and go and return again. I am reminded once more of your analogy to tides and waves, Louisa. In my next letter, where your experience of your unique sons is shared further, the waves of your early lives may roll in again or may be replaced by different tides. Let us see how the next part of the narrative grows.

Sincerely,

Joy-Ruth.

Linking our stories with labels

June/July/September/October 1994

Dear friends, Louisa, Joan, Caroline and Lena

My intent in writing this letter is to link your stories of your own unique child with the diagnoses you were delivered. Bounded as I am to my biography I know that the tension of this link will be invigorated by two stories that follow. They tell of two youngsters who, in all their particularities, were known to me recently. I then present your stories of your sons' early beginnings and their unique ways of being-in-the-world. I write about some theories of mothering and of polarized opinions regarding those theories. The diagnoses given you by professionals from different disciplines, and opinions and research about those diagnoses and the treatments offered you, is then presented. This letter will close but temporarily; treatments change and, like diagnoses, sometimes disappear. And the story will be retold.

The new teacher was fearful and wondered how she would manage to help the student to learn as she read page after page of anecdotal descriptions from the thick record that accompanied this new youngster from her kindergarten class. They filled the file that would voyage with her for the next twelve years.

"She spits, she kicks, she bites, she throws things around the room. She runs away, she swears at the teacher and disrupts the class most of the time." Four weeks had passed and it had been no different in her class, merely compounded by the presence of five equally active, troubled and troubling youngsters: fights were numerous, emotional outbursts frequent, earnest work efforts were deliberately destroyed and desks and chairs were

thrown dangerously. The teacher asked me to be in her class for a day to share my observations. I was apprehensive and wondered whether I would have any insights to offer.

Later, the youngster and I sat together on a bench in a long draughty hallway. A class straggled its way down the corridor bestowing their smiles freely on their young schoolmate as she waved and sang her replies unabashedly. "Tell me about you," I edged in quietly, as the last student in line disappeared around the corner, "You know, the sorts of things you like doing and how things are going for you in the classroom and we'll swap; I'll tell you bits and pieces about me. But first, do you have any ideas about why we're talking together and why your teacher has asked me to be here?" There was no wait time or tentative badinage whilst she sized me up. " Oh! I'm bad. I'm real bad. I'm bad in class and sometimes I'm bad at home too." I heard no pride, no self-glorification in her tone, just a questioning and a sense of resignation and awareness, a tone I had heard infrequently in one so young. We spent a long time together on that bench sharing ideas and exchanging stories. One of her wishes was to take ballet lessons; she twirled and pirouetted, she flitted and gambolled with the grace of Terpsichore and with perfect timing she breathed to me as she passed: "I learnt all this from TV."

This was the young student who, on standardized ability testing, scored in the Very Superior range of intellectual functioning; the youngster who, as told me by her mother, was busy from dawn till dusk. "She's just hyper, hyper, hyper!" her mom said. "She wears me out. And yet she's wonderful. I get mad with her, but I love her to bits. And we've got no money 'cos her dad's just left me...and I've got a new little one...and I have to work. And I worry about whether I can give her enough time and stuff to do. She's a bright kid you know."

I was told that she had just been placed on medication and had received a dual diagnosis from the family doctor: Attention-Deficit-Disorder with Hyperactivity (ADD-H), and Oppositional-Defiant-Disorder (ODD). I fantasized about what would have happened if someone had spent time with her, talking about hopes and ambitions, wishes and fantasies, and a gamut of sensical and nonsensical ideas and dreams. Vivian Paley found:

> "Let's pretend" was a stronger glue than any preplanned list of topics, and the need to make friends, assuage jealousy, and gain a sense of one's own destiny provided better reasons for self-control than all my disciplinary devices (1986, p.124).

And would things have been different for this young student had she and her teacher planned her *currere*, her curriculum, and would she then have felt more in charge of her own school and life destiny?

a load of labels

Grumet calls it "the proliferation of the name game," she believes that it comes "under the guise of individuation of instruction (and) the pretense of sensitivity to differences".

> The interface between the school and the family is packed with pseudonyms for the child. Although the teacher may develop and maintain a subtle understanding of a child, that tentative, complex, dynamic impression is flattened into a print-out of evaluations that freeze the child into codes and into terse objectifications (1988, p. 172).

All labels are "stigmatizing to the persons to whom they are applied" and the negative effect of a negative label "seems well established" (Gaylord-Ross, 1992, p. 48).

During my years in teaching, in social work, in counselling, and in psychology I have been handed the italicized words which follow, with all the foreboding of Salome's platter. Yet I have known students whose "*very difficult behaviour*" screened a child with amazing talents, whose "*impossible behaviour*" cloaked one who was nine years old and unable to read, and whose "*completely unmanageable behaviour*" hid an unhappy, disorganized, uncoordinated young adult whose writing was illegible and whose "cover" was maintained by an absolute refusal to do anything at school. I have also known those whose inner or outer lives were in such turmoil that "*acting-out*" or being a "*zombie*" seemed to them, and sometimes to me, the only tenable survival option.

"He's positively hyper" I would be told, or, "he's an ants-in-the-pants kid." My visit would be arranged to coincide with a range of activities, including recess and non-academic subjects, and I would meet and talk with mothers and teachers and the different adults in his life. Sometimes I learned that the student would listen to his mother reading stories to him "for hours." At other times I would be in a class for forty minutes and would watch him poring over an art project intently. A dad would describe his son's skating on ice, in infinite detail, conjuring for me an image of a complex arabesque with the young skater weaving in and out with the grace of Gretzky, aware of his teammates through a magical sixth sense. From another student I would learn of an engrossment with globes and geography which voyaged far beyond trivia facts.

the metaphor of measurement yet again

How I began to dislike the checklists I would be given, with their fuzzy, faintly-etched ticks scribing an unhappy life. I reviewed the markers of authority. D.W.M.O.N., boxed-in units of time: Daily; Weekly; Monthly; Occasionally; Never. But their meaning differs for each registrand. Daily was circled for an eleven year old student under the broad category "Stereotypic/Ritualistic Mannerisms" and for the specific behaviour "Insists on keeping certain objects with him." I learned that the student refused to remove from the top of her desk small "collectibles," those usually offered as "freebies" in cereal packages or as "give-aways" at fast-food outlets. When I visited her mother and father I met a couple whose home glowed from lavished care and beamed its welcome. Silver teaspoons hung in racks, nurtured plants cascaded from macraméed hangings and crocheted antimacassars lay lovingly on chairs.

The context for understanding their daughter's circled behaviour was revealed to me when I was asked whether I would like to see her room. On every shelf and in every nook and cranny small ornaments stood assertively. Ceramic dogs, glass cats, papier-maché tigers and hand-sewn dolls all jostled for position. Their colors combined to form a joyful display. Pride of ownership and arrangement was evident and I learned that the young girl reorganized them weekly. By understanding context, listening, believing, and accepting, a different reality is presented and unexpected insights can explicate concerning behaviours...different experiences...different stories...different realities.

The above stories remain vivid, etched in my being, and I use them as a main-spring to your accounts of unique sons and, later in this letter, to the diagnoses that were given to you at different moments in your lives. The writing of your lives and of your experience of being mothers of sons named as behaviourally disordered has reinforced for me its complexities. You referred to one difficulty Louisa, after I'd returned the first transcription of our conversation with my comments in the large margins: "I found that when I was reading it. Nate didn't have any opinions. In fact I wish he would," and I wrote back: "Absolutely! (you're right) Nate's own voice is not heard here - in this research I was hoping for your voice - your experience. His voice is another side of the coin." When I thought about this later I wished I had written "his voice is one other facet of the prism." A coin's two sides reinforces a duality whereas a prism's refractions reflect more accurately the multivocal quality of our lives with their multiple realities.

early days and their particularities of potentiality

Before I write your tales of the diagnostic delivery, deliberated and presented in a variety of settings, I'd like to tell your stories of your sons' beginnings and of their unique ways of being in the world. I am aware, as are all who choose narrative inquiry, that I am retelling your tales, and that I may be omitting details that you told me that you believe are critical to the understanding of your experiences of their uniqueness, or on the contrary, I may be including aspects that you do not wish to be read. Please let me know if this is so and we can discuss further all the implications of my omission and agree about changes. I reiterate, you have the "say." You have the authority; for you are the authors of your stories and I am the author of this narrative; we may agree to disagree but your voice shall be honored. Some of my uncoverings may not fit for you and I am confident that you will let me know when this happens. You also, in your telling, have shared some things and may have left out others. This happens when we story our lives.

> We are, in the very act of story making, deciding what to tell and what to leave out and imposing structure and meaning on events. And, as Hayden White (1981) argues with respect to historical narratives, the coherency stories achieve reflects the "moralizing impulse" (p. 22) of the teller. A story, in other words, is a theory of something. What we tell and how we tell it is a revelation of what we believe (Carter, 1993, p. 9).

Joan, the picture of pursuit that engaged you from Lloyd's infancy has been portrayed on prior pages. You felt that your young son was ready to take on the world:

> But he was his own person from day one. By seven months he had seven teeth and I mean even his teething was early...He was like Bambam, you know, from the Flintstones...so he was very bright, very inquisitive, and he was happy all the time but always on the move. A good sleeper oh and a phenomenal eater and still is, he eats like a man, that's why he's the size of a ten year old at seven.

The biggest difficulty for you, during his infancy, was his hatred of loud noises. The sounds of the vacuum-cleaner or the food processor would send him in a tizzy and you described how you would "put a towel over the food processor and sort of hunch over it to deaden the noise" while you were making his baby food.

> It would put him into screaming fits of terror. It just terrorized him so much. Even when he was about a year-and-a-half. Dave would have to take him upstairs to a bedroom, close the door, and keep him distracted while I vacuumed downstairs.

You then told of a particular time which seemed to you to be a pivotal one in his development:

> And from the time he could walk (he was) very independent. Um...and I can remember when he was about eighteen months and he was starting to talk, and I can't remember what the situation was, he was touching and into something anyway, and I had told him several times: 'No!' And so I finally went over and I gave him one of these, you know, tapped his hand. And I remember he just put his hands on his hips and he said: "Toopid nummy!" Well of course, we know what that meant, and he was like this high; "toopid nummy" and I thought oh my god!

And we both laughed. From your height of five foot ten you looked down at this little toddler who stood, arms akimbo, telling you what he thought of you.

> And I can trace it...I can trace it back to toopid nummy. You bet. It sounds bizarre, but I can. And you know, when he became two he was just, oh with other children he just...he would beat the crap out of ANY other child. Kids five years old. I mean he was very aggressive. I mean very aggressive...I mean I know a lot of two year olds are aggressive but I mean he was a nightmare to take, I mean he would beat up everybody's kids and he would break things. He was like a Tasmanian Devil twirling...

For you, Caroline, things also started to happen when your youngest son was two years. You told me later that he was two-and-a-half when he played out the frightening scene that follows and I remember thinking about the insidiousness of the effects of media attention given to similar high-profiled statements of violence.

> ...I was over at a girl-friend's one day with Ryan and er he was saying a few strange things. He was only two and he was...she had this remote control truck and he picked up the remote for it and it was shaped like a gun and he put it to his

> head and he said: "I want to blow my brains out." And er I knew that wasn't normal.

Your most persistent memory of him until then was that he was a constant crier, "he cried all the time" and you didn't find him easy to comfort. People would comment to you: "Oh! He doesn't look a very happy baby." Nights and days were difficult for you.

> Well you'd put him in his bed and he'd climb out and kick the door and he was very hyper and defiant and he wouldn't listen and er. They had a lot of problems with him at day-care too, about not listening. You try and put him to his room for something really bad that he had done, he'd be out there and he'd scream, and he'd kick the walls and he'd tear his room apart...

You continued by telling me that things got no better for you, nor for him, "I don't know, everything was just really coming apart with him." He was getting into lots of "mischief" outside your apartment as well, and this was affecting the way you were reacting and treating him.

> ...he'd pick up sticks, he'd hit kids, he slowly got kind of meaner. If he could get hold of somebody's cat, you know, he'd take it around the corner and kind of throw it around and stuff and try and hurt it a bit; and, um, just very defiant.

And then you told me about another very frightening occurrence. It happened when he was about four and a half:

> Me and my neighbour were on the step and Ryan was playing with the little girl, and all of a sudden he stuck his head through the storm window, for no reason, you know. He was on the step, and we were on her step, and we were both sitting there, and all of a sudden we heard this smash and here Ryan had just grabbed the door like this and he just rammed his head right through the window, broke all the

> glass and then he pulled his head out, which in one way I suppose is good. I thought for sure he'd be in a terrible shape. But it's a good thing he did pull it out because there was this one long piece like this that was lined up right above his neck just about ready to fall. Anyway, I just kind of, I don't know, I think I went into shock, because my neighbour kind of took over...

So much was happening for you and, as you said, you just "tolerated" the rest of that summer.

Even as I am writing the stories you have told me about your unique sons, I am concerned about a "left hanging" feeling. As you read each others' experiences I hear you, and our other readers, asking: "Gosh, what happened next?" I want to reassure you that, in retelling your stories, it would be contrary to my ethic to use the artifice of creating suspense; I wish to tell of the boys, in all their individuality, and later tell the themes of consequence.

Your life Lena, with your young son Oliver, your third child, was very different from your experiences with your two daughters.

> He seemed to be an active little pre-schooler and child. He was a little more rambunctious, not so much in the physically hyper area always, just mentally. And an argumentative type. Never took a rule or a limit very easily at all. Personality, it was very strong in that way and kind of a negative bent to it.

You found him to be an intelligent youngster "right from the start" and, like Joan and Caroline, you have a story of him when he was almost two years old that stands out clearly in your mind.

> ...he was a skinny little guy in his Pampers standing out on the back deck...and he was talking away about the trees and talking about how the roots went underground and gathered water...He's always loved nature and would like sit and listen to being read to for hours and hours. Even when he was a little tyke and you were flipping around the channels he would say: "Turn that back, that was David Suzuki." Yeh loves general information and the way things work and that sort of thing and very verbal...So I thought, OK maybe a little rambunctious in some ways...like you're at a shopping mall and there was this big fire thing and he'd go and grab it...just impulsivity more than hyper.

"And it seems like a long, long time ago. Starting like years ago." Your words and tone Louisa, carried the weight of those years as you began your story.

> He was starting kindergarten and he was reading when he was three years old and we couldn't figure out why in kindergarten he had to be bothering people and poking people and not being able to settle into a task or even getting into anything that the class was doing if it was away from something academic...like if they were learning alphabets and things like that I could understand it, because he'd already learned those things. But fun things like rhyming games or ..er like physical things like games. I couldn't figure out why he didn't want to enjoy those things. He was a boy after all, and a five year old, whether he was reading or not.

Many of us hold the image of five-year old boys enjoying physical things, don't we? And if a youngster can read why wouldn't he enjoy word games?

Your wondering about what was beginning to happen for him had begun just before his kindergarten year and contrasted greatly with his earlier development:

> ...as a baby he wasn't colicky, he ate well, he slept, he was seven-fifteen when he was born, so he wasn't a tiny baby by any means and er I breast-fed him and he er just seemed to settle in quite well. He always behaved er he was a normal child he er walked at thirteen months. He was an early talker he had...he never...he wouldn't talk baby-talk, he just all of a sudden started talking like the rest of us adults. He was about sixteen months when he really started talking, and it wasn't ...he just seemed to all of a sudden talk. It was really quite amazing. He was very...out of the three children he was the most affectionate child. He...I don't know if it was out of need for not having me around as much, or er if it was just his nature but he was so...he wanted it from everybody and he enjoyed to give it as well. Yeh, he was very very nice that way. And he did that with anybody who came around as well. And it didn't seem to bother him that he was getting up and going to visit his friends. He had best friends at day-care and at baby-sitters...and he was excited to go and he was happy to see his friends and he was happy when we came to get him

When he was four years old and in day care "he was starting to get rowdy is I guess what the lady said to me." You had also written that he would wander far away from home, "at least, what seemed far. (Around the corner and up the street). He was never upset about being lost." He was not yet six when he started grade one and you were told that he was "not mature enough to be in grade one." He wasn't able "to sit down and wasn't able to listen" (the school's words).

So, we kept him home for the year. (And how was that year for you?) Well, it was

> bananas. I couldn't keep him occupied. I had a small baby and er if I didn't have him sitting and doing something with me or out for a walk or something, he was really into something. He'd be destroying stuff or (like into your cupboards, pulling out, destroying food?) No. Um, well taking things apart. He had to know what was inside everything. It didn't matter what it was, a telephone, a car, it didn't matter, he had to take it apart.

does the theory fit?

Most mothers, when able to do so, share their stories and worries about their children's growing and being. In social gatherings I have heard those who have no children say: "If I hear any more small-talk about their children's development I just won't come here anymore." I understand their feelings and know that sometimes "enough is enough" but this is not necessarily small-talk. It is often big-talk and it can be critically important talk. And these are all our children, theirs and yours and mine. The sharing and understanding make a forum for mothers to think and talk their thoughts and responses: "Mothers meeting together at their jobs, in playgrounds, or over coffee can be heard thinking" (Ruddick, 1991, p. 25). They spend time comparing ideas, agreeing about some and disagreeing about others, suggesting strategies that have worked for them and wondering about those that haven't. I introduce Ruddick's work here and elsewhere for I wish others to know how you have all participated in the work that she says is demanded of mothers: that of protecting; nurturing; and teaching children.

Not all agree with Ruddick's theory. Criticisms include her limited "sample," that of "affluent" educated middle-class mothers (which Ruddick acknowledges) and that she has not analysed mothering as an institution:

> "institution" understood both as the domain of medical practitioners and as the social construction of mothering practices as it is implicated in the wider socioeconomic-political-racial structures of the society in which it occurs (Code, 1991, p. 91).

Feminists challenge the reductionist aspect of Ruddick's concept of "maternal thinking" as "culturally and historically bound" and as being based on a universal conception of the nature of maternity (Weiss, 1994, p. xiii). Despite the challenge, we discussed, and you experienced, many of the aspects of being a mother of which Ruddick spoke.

Mothers' meeting and time spent in community also provide support and validation. This support has varied for you all; its lack left you feeling isolated and very alone, its provision validated your hard work and efforts and a large part of your living. When the birth of your second son was imminent Caroline, you had no access to supportive moms:

> I was so close to being due and he still took off all the time. You know, left me at home. We had no money, no phone. So if I had went into labour where do you go? What do you do?

And when both your sons were youngsters you "lived like a hermit. I was trapped." Louisa, you also spoke of your feelings of isolation: "I had nobody. I didn't even...I did not know to do that kind of thing. I did not know to go and say: 'What do you do with this? I don't know what to do." There was a lady across the road whom you had just met and "that was it." Your experiences were very different, Lena and Joan, you both had neighbours and friends to "talk things over with." You and your friend's pertinent comments about a school report are found on other pages Lena, and Joan, you enjoyed having “coffee with ladies that I met in the class.” You described it as part of the “best two years of my life.”

How heart-warming it is, this support! As new mothers “the passions of maternity are so sudden, intense, and confusing” “(Ruddick, p. 10) that we lose the confidence we may have had and trust that experts will have the answers we seem so desperately to seek. You sought their opinions, those “..’experts’ who hoped to be heard by mothers rather than to hear what mothers had to say” (ibid. p. 11) and at times it reinforced your feelings of guilt and self-doubt. You were troubled sorely by having to work, Louisa. You felt those first years to be critical ones for developing a relationship with your first-born:

> I had a very difficult time. I think...I think that emotionally I didn’t accept the fact that I was working. I really felt that I should be home and er and because you put such pressure on yourself...the stress that you create for yourself..it’s very difficult. Um after I put him into day-care he started to get sick an awful lot as well. He had pneumonia twice, all kinds of bronchial infections, and diarrhoeia. He had diarrhoeia for eighteen months straight and we couldn’t figure out what to do...It took a long time to find someone that I trusted, because it seemed...it seemed even then that I was getting shots about working. The doctors. In particular two clinics that I went to , there would be two doctors per clinic that I visited and they would keep saying things like: ‘Well! You know Mrs. G. You shouldn’t be working. You should be...he really isn’t tolerating being around these children as much.’

You took Oliver to your family doctor Lena, to tell him of the difficulties he was starting to have at school and how "he's starting to get labeled a problem child."

> Dr. Brown checked him you know, gave him a physical and everything and he kept saying, mind you, Oliver would be mad and running through the whole room and asking about all his instruments and all of that, and so for those years Dr. Brown would say: 'Hey! He's just an active little boy, extremely intelligent. I don't see any problems.'

A little over a year later Dr. Brown adjusted his opinions about Oliver, when the problems at school increased, and the diagnoses began to accumulate, for Oliver and Nate and Ryan and Roger and Lloyd.

diagnosis: the weighty "D"

The definition of diagnosis in my weighty Oxford Universal Dictionary (1955) is: 1. Medical. Determination of the nature of a diseased condition; identification of a disease by investigation of its symptoms and history; also, the formal statement of this. 2. Biological. Distinctive characterization in precise terms. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1979) provides this extension: Identification of disease by means of patient's symptoms &c., formal statement of this; classification of person's character, assignment of species &c. Funk and Wagnalls Standard Desk Dictionary (1977) add (b): The conclusion arrived at, and (2). Any similar examination, summary, and conclusion. Both dictionaries give the etymological source as Greek, from the verb *gignosko* to recognize, and that verb derives from *gnostikos* meaning knowledge. To me, the dictionary definition of "summary, and conclusion" presents a finite quality of closure, with future possibilities being truncated.

I am uncomfortable, also, with the word disease being used in relationship to the ongoing development of our children in their socially constructed world; it gives me a profound sense of unease. Many mothers whom I have met over the years have expressed the same feeling to me, when they learned that their child had been assigned a category, a code, taken from a handbook named The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) (DSM-IV), and 1987 (DSM-III-R). The words "mental disorders" frighten us all by their associations. The diagnoses that your sons were given were taken from the 1987 edition of the manual under Disruptive Behaviour Disorders. In the more recent edition the criteria for those diagnoses remain very similar. In the latter they are subsumed under "Disorders Usually First Diagnosed in Infancy, Childhood, or Adolescence".

Questions continue to be raised about the applicability of using the manual in educational settings and "definitional terms and operational criteria" remain problematic (Pullis, 1991; Kauffman, 1989). When talking about the cultural bias present in assessments, Reilly (1991) identifies the practice as an albatross:

> It is not just the level and type of behaviour that children exhibit that result in the labeling of children as behaviour disordered. Rather, it is the particular set of characteristics that make a person uniquely individual and result in different reactions from others in the environment that may be equated with deviance. Has the child met the norms and expectations of his or her cultural group or deviated from them? (p. 50).

The manual, mentioned above, remained a mystery to you and you told me that you had not heard of it. But we discussed "norms and expectations" at many different times and I will tell, later, of Nate's discovery, Louisa, that what was acceptable in one setting was definitely not acceptable in another! Jeammet (1992) says: "Considering children or adolescents from the sole angle of their pathological conduct simply imprisons them within it" (p. 468).

Another discomfort that I have is the use made of those diagnoses and extends to a position I held where the assessment of youngsters seemed to be tied more to a "big buck" sign than to the provision of needed collaborative interventions. My overwhelming need was to recognize the individuality of the youngsters I was with and to resist constrictive "pigeon-holing" while, at the same time, recognizing the particularities that might benefit from alternate ways of being.

Maxmen (1991) elaborates the purpose of a psychiatric diagnosis:

> ...the first being to define clinical entities so that clinicians have the same understanding of what a diagnostic category means. Although patients with a particular (medical or psychiatric) diagnosis need not exhibit identical features, they should present with certain cardinal symptoms. The disorder should have a similar natural history - a typical age of onset, life course, prognosis, and complications...The same disorder may arise in more than one way, but a diagnostic category should indicate whether a mental disorder consistently runs in families, is genetically transmitted, initiated by psychosocial forces, and exacerbated or aggravated by specific biological and environmental conditions.
>
> The other main purpose of a psychiatric diagnosis is to determine treatment (p. 4).

Treatment, something that would "work," a way to help change what was fast becoming extremely difficult for you all and was coloring every facet of your living, was what you wanted urgently and we'll share those urgencies with each other and with our readers later. We'll also share those interventions that were offered, but first I'll present the stories of the diagnoses.

After your "toopid nummy" story, Joan, you said that "consequently" Lloyd was "diagnosed as Hyperactive and Attention-deficit and er behav...Oppositional-Defiant" and that this diagnosis was given when he was in kindergarten: "they also called in the er school psychologist, that sort of travels from school to school. We had him, that's when the first label came." Following a particularly upsetting incident in kindergarten you took Lloyd to your trusted family doctor, who had known him since infancy. As you told me what had happened at the doctors' office, I was aware that your trust and their combined caring provided a backdrop of professional support that other institutions, as yet, had not been able to give.

> They're all wonderful guys, they're all young and in their thirties. And very contemporary. Up with what's happening... "We've always known he was a busy boy' he said...and er he gave him the standard quick Attention-deficit quiz and er of course he had 'em all, and he said 'basically he's pretty text-book, he's got them all.'

You were referred, by those physicians, to a psychiatrist, whom you emphasized as:

> the Ultimate. You know, he's The God of Hyperactivity...He also confirmed... he also, as he said, labeled him. He's the one who labeled him Oppositional Defiant. ...Although it's been almost two years now it was only the last visit that he actually said: 'Well, I don't like labels, but if you want a label I've actually given Lloyd

> two. Hyperactive and Attention-deficit and Oppositional Defiant.'

I had jotted a comment in the margin of that first transcript "You went to the Deity" and further down the page I wrote, "even God doesn't like labels." You chuckled when you read that, as we had both chewed on the constrictions that labels engender even as we are aware of their place in the polity.

> These labels are useful as guides in the choice of the bio-medical components of therapeutic management, especially psychopharmacotherapy (Cotton, 1993, p. 20).

"Dosed with the diagnosis and dosed with the dosage," I scribbled on a Post-it, remembering your stories of medication.

Your experience of the diagnosis, Joan, differed from Caroline's, not only in the support that you both felt from those in the field of health care, but for you Caroline, it was the length of time that it took for the seriousness of your concerns to be recognized.

> At Fieldcrest he went to a few programs. The first program he got into was a Child Behaviour program...that was for five weeks, just in the morning, then he got released from that. But the first time he didn't qualify to get into any kind of other program like...a day care with an aide, because he wasn't considered severe, and to me that was very frustrating, because I said: 'Well what is he?' And they said: 'Well, he's just got behaviour problems. He has to have severe behaviour problems for him to get into a program.'

At the end of the summer, after the door incident, you telephoned Fieldcrest: "Listen! You know I need help again, can I come down?" They helped. They allowed him to return to the child behaviour program for about eight weeks and then "lined up a full-time aide" for him in day-care. By then, you told me, "he was classified as severe."

> You know, I was kind of mad you know. I told them, I said: 'Is this what it takes, is wait for a child to stick their head through windows or hurt somebody or..?' You know, like, I was kind of angry with it. It had to take that long before he could be qualified for a program.

Louisa, your involvement with professionals had started earlier, but the first diagnosis came when Nate was in grade one and the school psychologist was called in.

> She did lots of tests. At one point she said: "This is the most depressed young boy I have ever met in my life." Which of course...and I went completely to pieces at that point and er..What do we do now? Well it was a test that he had done. She read a statement out to me that Nate felt like a little bug. Just a little bug on a log. It was really, really upsetting. It just tore me apart. And er let me see, was the psychiatrist then or...I can't really remember. We had gone to our family doctor as well. Getting blood tests and making sure this wasn't a physical kind of thing and check that out first. Um...and then we got a recommendation to...he went to one of the psychiatrists at Fieldcrest.

I remember a long, long pause here, after I had asked you how that had been, for, like our co-researchers all, "we have been talked to death." Death and exhaustion enters your next sentence:

> You know, Nate has been labeled to death...with all different kinds of labels...sociopathic, there was some schizophrenia tossed in for good measure. Yes, there's been all kinds...conduct disorder...and the psychiatrist said in front of Nate that he would never amount to anything.

Grade one was where the diagnosis also happened for you, Lena, so you took Oliver to Dr. Larch, your family doctor. "He's having difficulties and now he's starting to get labeled a problem child." At that time Dr. Larch was not perturbed unduly. But the school counsellor thought that Oliver was hyperactive and had Attention-deficit disorder and referred you to the medical doctor at a municipal Health Clinic. When you took the results of that assessment back to Dr. Larch he:

> [Raised his eyebrows? I see you're raising yours!) He...he...well. Well, and then he kind of surprised me because he flipped over once he saw that and he said: "Oh well! I guess he is..."

And then you realised that, despite your misgivings, he agreed to the diagnosis of Attention-Deficit Disorder. The school called in a behaviour consultant several times during those first two years. When he was in grade two you had asked: "Oh. Did the consultant come out and look at Oliver?"

> 'Yes! And you know what? He was perfect that day.' Like they were mad that he didn't show them, 'cos he could get them all spinning, the whole school. But no! He was perfect that day. And wouldn't you know it.(laughter) But I guess, well next year the consultant must have seen him in full force, because what...what was relayed to me...that what his perception and diagnosis was that Oliver was severely clinically depressed and suicidal. ...Oh. I thought my world had fallen apart.

For me, diagnoses have the effect that all is parcelled, wrapped, tightly tied, signed, sealed, and delivered. They arrive from landscapes turbulent yet unique, seem funnelled into trenches with high escarpments, and limit horizons and potentialities. Life experiences come, as do children, in many shapes and sizes and there is no one model that fits all (Etter-Lewis, 1991, p. 43). Coles (1988) calls us to heed Anna Freud's voice. He tells us:

> She was a great one for what she called 'watchful waiting' with respect to children...(She) has helped all of us in child psychiatry to pause and wait, lest a moment's diagnostic and categorical zeal be wonderfully or sadly mocked by time - a symptom, gone, or a spell of progress undercut by trouble that seems to have come from nowhere (p. 287).

The diagnoses that you were given became a critical climax in your tellings, for they led to treatments, interventions and exclusions. Your varied responses of hurt, anger, frustration, relief, despair, validation and support, reflected your realities and your lives. Would there have been the interventions without those diagnoses? And are there ways of understanding and supporting the complexities of our lives without encapsulating them? And if that were so would not your responses be focused wholly toward an horizon of hope and possibility?

pharmocotherapy and the "magic pill"

Medication, seen by many as the pinnacle of interventions, is bonded to the diagnoses you were given with all the tough adherence of epoxy. As diverse as were your responses to the diagnoses, so were they to the direction of medication. You were worried, Caroline, because of your former husband's experience with Ritalin, the same medication that the psychiatrist prescribed for Ryan, and you "wouldn't even let them put him on that." But he was on other medication, Tegretol and Rivotril. Then, when an antidepressant was prescribed for Roger, you thought : "Oh boy, Here we go again." Hank said: "Oh no.

Not another one on pills...Gee! I didn't want to see Roger on pills." But you did fill the prescription and Roger started taking Pertofrane and Neuleptil. "An antidepressant and the other one for sleeping. It didn't do a darn thing for him last night." You told me that, for Ryan, you thought "a lot of the pills did nothing, or they'd work for a couple of weeks." I remembered how pills had felt for you:

> And the first pills he gave me. Oh my! I was, oh I got so high on them, it was terrible. I took them that night and I swear, it was about a half-hour later, I felt like I wasn't on the floor no more. I felt just awful. And the after effects of them. In the morning it felt like I had been drinking all night. The head hurt and I had to go to work. I had to walk two kids three blocks to the day-care in the cold, hop on my bus and go to work and try to make it through a six hour shift at work like that.

It's hard not to project our own responses about things onto others, isn't it? I sometimes wonder, if I feel like that, or if this or that has such an effect on me, is this the same feeling that others have? The medication prescribed for Ryan was a concern for you, initially, because you didn't see that it made a difference; but then things changed:

> Last night we felt that Ryan's on track now. Sure, it's taking medication to do it, but Ryan's a lot more severe than Roger. I mean Ryan was hallucinating, he was talking to himself, he was talking to voices that he could hear, he could see faces in the dark. And so now Ryan's on track.

When Nate was assessed at Fieldcrest: "At that point he was put on medication. They tried Ritalin at first. Ritalin had no effect on him whatsoever. Um, they er...then he was put on Tofranil, Nupronil, those kinds of things." And you asked me, Louisa, whether I was familiar with those medications. I had time to say only: "Yes, I am" for you continued quickly: "He's no longer on medication...he hasn't been for a couple of years now." I felt your unsaid "See. It didn't do any good, anyway." Later, we discussed it further, and you told me: "Yeh. Well. That was the way I felt."

It was the school counsellor, Lena, who thought Oliver "should really be on Ritalin," so when the doctor said that she thought Ritalin:

> might help (this) made the teachers all very happy. They thought he was going to start taking this magic pill. I generally am philosophically opposed to, you know, drug intervention, but by that point I thought I'll try anything.

You spoke of the six week honeymoon period when he first started taking Ritalin:

> and they were ever so pleased at school, and I was too. Around home it didn't make much difference one way or another...then it was like he plateau'd on it. And then he had increasing problems again. And it was like it was wearing off at eleven in the morning and at two thirty in the afternoon. And then they were getting mad outbursts. All that spinning around. So then we tried er slow release Ritalin. You know, just once a day. And there again, after we'd made that switch, again the pattern. Kind of a honeymoon period. Aha! this must be the dosage, or the combination. And then just fall off after a short time. Like falling off the wagon. It was just like regardless, he would go back into those patterns.

The key to unlock the combination of the "magic pill" seemed ever elusive and although, at times, he baulked at taking the medication, you found the way that worked: "I just drop the subject for half-an-hour and then 'Oh, who wants a glass of juice? And ok here's your pill Oliver' and he's forgot and he's watching tv and he'll take it." But you said that he disliked taking the medication, intensely, and that, for him, the plan of having a "drug holiday" held promise. You spoke later of his very successful summer, sans medication.

You've watched yourself come full circle, Joan, from outspoken opposition to outspoken acquiescence.

> Medication was always...er...brought up. And I strongly always vetoed it. Because I had read a lot of horror stories er where er from twenty years back kids had been on Ritalin and it would stay in the system and build up...and the dosages were wrong and so on. And again, being Earth Mother, I wasn't into medication. I wasn't into the medication and I told them basically to go to hell and that I wasn't going to medicate my child in order to make their jobs easier, I believe was how I put it.

As the school year was almost over, you wanted to try "the naturopath route" and so you chose to go to a practitioner who was both a homoeopath and a naturopath: "I tried him for a few months and there was nothing. It was like giving him sugar pills, I mean it did nothing...but I felt time was running out." The distance of several years did not veil the anxiety and fear that you had felt, and that others have expressed, about the press of time. The doctor to whom you returned, and in whom you had trust, told you that he had success in treating youngsters like Lloyd "with anti-depressants, as compared to Ritalin."

> ...which just floored me, 'cos that was just horrible, so that bothered me more than the Ritalin. But I tried the anti-depressant. Did it for a month and then went back to him and said 'Get him off.' Because by then he was in school and he was...it was making him depressed, and it was almost bringing manic symptoms that Lloyd had never had before...he's basically a very happy boy...it's short-lived with him,

> he's basically very happy..

You had the support of the school; the principal and the teacher had telephoned you confirming and validating your awareness and observations. When you telephoned the psychiatrist's office you notified his assistant:

> Look! This, this, and this, are the changes in my boy...the three of us who know him better than you guys do are in agreement that this is not the medicine for him.

The surprise at hearing your own voice requesting what you had feared previously, and still did in some measure, rang in my ears as you relayed your words:

> I want Ritalin. Just straight Ritalin. I don't want two or three drugs combined...I've done your anti-depressant, it makes me sick. I can't, my conscience, I can't live with it...Try the Ritalin; which yes, amazed me that I was pushing any drug. And to humor me, more than anything, he put Lloyd on it. And the Ritalin has been very successful.

You have seen the gains that Lloyd has made and you describe the routineness of the pill's ingestion and the high visibility of its "positive results" yet, despite its success,the continued anguish of your dilemma remained. "I just pray down the road there's no...there's no damage inside of him, that nobody knew about, that kind of thing." You echo the words of many mothers who know that Ritalin, the name given to methylphenidate, is the psychostimulant prescribed frequently for children diagnosed with Attention-deficit disorder. "(It is) used with over ninety-percent of children who are treated with stimulants" (du Paul and Stover, 1994, p.136). The most up-to-date information I could discover indicates:

> The only long-term side-effect of stimulant medication that has been well

> documented is suppression of height and weight gain. Studies examining this phenomenon have indicated that the probability of growth suppression increases with higher doses...A rebound in growth following discontinuation of treatment or habituation to this effect seems to occur thereafter, with little appreciable alteration in eventual adult height or weight (p.152).

Even as I quote the authors and the results of their scientific research I reflect on my own experience. In my work with children and their families I was asked frequently: "Well, what do you think? You've seen my child. Is it a good idea, this medication?" I did not reply quickly. I weighed my words so that I could share the range of thoughts and understandings I had about their child's presence, their being. I needed to hear, to see, to know, and to connect, from a multiplicity of perspectives, how their youngsters presented themselves to their world. I thought of the kaleidoscope that I had played with as a child and which remains as a delight of the everchanging and the unexpected. As I turned the smooth cylinder, covered with marbled paper, and peered through the opening, multi-colored diadems would drop into patterns only to regroup more wondrously as I moved my hands slowly, twisting the nested cylinders. The youngsters I have known were thus, scintillating with their own kaleidoscopic beings. And that is why I answered slowly. And many times I would tell of those who took the pills whose turmoil had turned topsy-turvy and whose presence had become attentive; and I would tell of all things that were considered. And the moms and dads would know that it was their decision to make and that they could always change their minds.

Are you breathing a sigh of relief, Joan, knowing that Lloyd's physique of "seven going on ten" releases him from the statistical average, the "probabilities" and "seemings" quoted above. And I breathe my own sigh, Lena, as I hear your voice telling me of the large growth spurt Oliver had this summer. Happily, you have all had similar experiences and so that particular finding does not apply. And you speak for many mothers, Joan, when you say: "Every...every morning when I give him his medication part of me just dies inside." But you do give it. Your physician had chosen to prescribe an antidepressant for Lloyd. He told you that he, like others, had found: "(tricyclic antidepressants) have been shown to produce behavioural effects similar to those of the stimulants with children with ADHD" (ibid., p. 140). However, from the research findings: "a child's response to these medications requires more intense monitoring" because of "potential side effects." Your knowing of him enabled you to protest loudly when you realised the drug was wrong for him. How fortunate Lloyd is, to have a school principal and classroom teacher, as well as a mother, whose gaze is wide-awake, whose caring is ever-evident, and whose knowing is grounded in practice.

The above authors, citing recent research, speak also of information presented in the "popular media" which proposes "possible" long term side-effects (of stimulant medication) such as "drug addiction, depression, or other emotional difficulties," and although "These claims have no basis in the empirical literature and should not be considered actual treatment risks" (ibid., p. 152) their "possibilities" frighten us. I wonder, as do you, where and how in this tapestry of time, did depression or emotional difficulty weave itself into your sons' lives? The authors acknowledge:

> Although the statistical significance of the behavioural effects of methylphenidate have been demonstrated reliably, the clinical significance of behavioural changes for

individual children with ADHD has been demonstrated less frequently (ibid., p. 147).

In conversation with a child psychiatrist many years ago, I recall protesting: "Well, this business of medication is all trial and error and hit or miss, isn't it ?" As I spoke the words, I felt aggrieved. I wanted answers. I was content with ambiguity and uncertainty in my relationship with children and young people and in the discoveries of our teaching and knowing but I had hoped naively for some certainty from those in science. "You're right," the psychiatrist replied, "that's what it is, trial and error. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. When it doesn't, I try something else." Thirty-five years later his words remain with me. And because of all these things I am slow and cautious in my conversations with parents and I make sure I tell of teachers, parents, and children, whose experiences can be shared and whose lives have been transformed following pharmacotherapy and "the magic pill".

This letter has included your tellings of the professionals who entered your lives and I shall continue those stories in the following letter. There, the connection and relationships with professionals, inside and outside your sons' schooling, will be explored.

Sincerely,
Joy-Ruth.

Diversities and relationships

July/September/October/November 1994

Dear Joan, Lena, Louisa, and Caroline,

The words that I included in my original proposal about my inquiry reappear here, they tell of my experience when reviewing the research literature, that the voices of mothers whose sons were in the "BD" class were rarely heard. Like you all, I have been engaged in trying to "sort things out." I then share Cyrano's story, and the ambivalence its message can engender. And I discuss Bakhtin's concept of carnival and its relationship to your stories and your relationships with professionals.

During my working years I was aware of most of the supportive groups available for parents but realised that, as I had found when I searched in recent literature, little was heard from parents whose children were called behaviour disordered. I described what I had found in the research:

> ...many stories written by mothers whose children had a range of physical and psychological challenges, but little that was written about, or by, mothers whose children were called behaviour disordered (Ferguson, Ferguson and Taylor, 1992; Gaylord-Ross, 1992; Pivato, 1990). When I was thinking about the direction that I could travel in this inquiry and discussed it with colleagues, I received conflicting responses. Some said: 'Oh! They won't want to talk with you. They feel blamed enough already.' And, 'I don't think you'd better call, they've got enough problems. Anyway, they'll think you're from the school and they don't like hearing from us.' Others said: ' I think Mrs. Smith would love to talk to you.' and,

'Mrs. Brown told me that someone should hear her story and then they would understand.'

At the beginning of this narrative I include your enthusiastic responses to me when I asked whether you would be willing to join me as co-researchers. I want to repeat them again in this letter because they have invigorated me throughout the year and have engaged my thoughts, about mothers' practical knowing, in constant dialogue. " What a great idea! That's a really great idea! I'd love to tell you how things are for me," "At last someone wants to hear what I have to say. It's time for my turn." Louisa, you said: "Well...I have been listened to, but...nothing comes of it. This will help me sort things out for myself."

we all want to sort things out

Even as you spoke that last phrase, Louisa, "this will help me sort things out for myself," I felt the undertone of liberated energy, with its attendant work, experience and reflection, as well as a future for legitimated power. I, too, have been exerted in similar sorting as I have struggled to retell your stories with an ethic of care and fidelity; a sorting informed by the ongoing tension between contrasting philosophical positions on knowledge, meaning and interpretation, and on objectivity and subjectivity. When I thought about sorting, I wondered whether it would help me to clarify my understanding through metaphor, in order to affirm my belief that the inclusion of dissenting positions creates new possibilities and new directions for knowing.

On rereading my letters to you, I realised that I had been liberal in my use of metaphor. Janesick (1994) "wholeheartedly agrees," as do I, with Eisner's belief in the power of metaphor:

> for making public the ineffable, nothing is more precise than the artistic use of language. Metaphoric precision is the central vehicle for revealing the qualitative aspects of life (1991, p. 227).

Janesick uses the metaphor of dance, and the qualitative researcher as artist, in her chapter "The Dance of Qualitative Research Design." I, too, found that I returned to my earlier experiences in art and used their tangibility to throb my thoughts. To sort, for myself, the dialectic between those contrasting philosophical positions mentioned above, I tried remembering my aunt's button bag. I used to spend hours sorting the jumble of buttons snipped from dress alterations. So many ways to sort: by size; by shape; by color. Is this one round, a circle, an oblong or ellipse? Is it square or nearly square or is it more rectangular? Is that green or turquoise? Or emerald? Navy, cerulean, cobalt or aquamarine? Yellow ochre or raw sienna, burnt or raw umber? Is this made from a shell or an imitation-shell? Is it translucent or transparent? Plastic or "real" ? The hundreds of mother-of-pearl buttons ranged from tiny to tinier. I would sort them this way and then that way; at times matching the design, at others matching the fabric and textures. And always sorting the subtle gradations of color. It became an aesthetic of connections and relations. Its continuum was iridiscent, innovative and fluid.

I had been working hard at "sorting things out" with my button bag memories when serendipity moved once again into this narrative. Browsing in a bookstore I read words which led me to the cash register, book in hand. The author's text, and my reading of it, reflected my sort:

> Dichotomies are especially problematic in that they posit exclusionary constructs,

> not complementary or interdependent ones that could shade into one another or function as "mixed modes" rather than absolutes (Code, 1991, p. 29).

And so I continue my letter and I bring your words and mine; and your experiences of your sons' schooling, and of your knowing, and what you made of it all, with a "mixed mode" in mind. Your meeting with professionals, both in and out of schools, appears and reappears in all the many passages which follow.

coming to the classroom to meet the teacher

A teacher friend, who for several years has taught a segregated class of six to nine year olds diagnosed as behaviour disordered, told me of her experiences. I had asked her whether she ever met with her students' parents as a group and she replied:

> Well, I've had a little trouble with arranging that. They all seem comfortable and at ease on a one-on-one with me, but I've noticed that even if there's another parent there or the counsellor or another adult, it's not the same. They feel a little bit less willing to share. Even if there's been activities for the whole school I've rarely seen them all out...or even most of them. It seems a lot of trouble.... In some cases it's physically impossible, for instance Buddie's parents. He works from two in the afternoon until eleven in the evening, so he can't make it. And mom can't because of the other three children. Well, it's different in most cases obviously, but in general a number of them have had... whether it's been that fingers have really been pointed at them... they've felt that.....a lot of blame has been focussed on them. And perhaps it's uncomfortable having other parents in with them at times... maybe that would have to be even acknowledging even further... you know. Yes! There's a real problem with my child. You can talk about your own problems with

> your child and the teacher and that's perfectly normal, but when you have a group of parents who are in a small, you know, separate program, then you have to really face the fact that yeah my child's part of a group that's been identified as having special needs.

My friend is sensitive to parents' feelings and experiences and this has enabled her to connect with parents (generally mothers) of all her students and to develop a relationship that is mutually satisfying and equitable. She is aware of the boundaries that can exist between parents and schools. The notion of boundaries, as an organising principle for their work, was adopted by a group of researchers in England (David et al. 1993). They did not believe boundaries to be permanent or rigid, merely implying "that there are different ways of viewing the world dependent on one's social position" (p. 209). The tale of the Blindmen and the Elephant is familiar and provides an analogy, for it shows how the construction of different kinds of knowledge comes into being. David et al. wanted to examine the relationship between families and education from a feminist perspective and particularly from the viewpoint of women as mothers. One of the researchers, Ribbens, described the tensions that exist about how parental authority, which is nearly always maternal in this particular context, moves from home to school:

> ....there are very few women for whom this will not represent a major shift in their life style and identity as mothers, as well as introducing a major new area for continuing maternal mediation (p. 89).

You discovered that shift when Nate moved into a structured environment, Louisa, first in a day-care and later in kindergarten:

> And at that point she told me I had ought to give him a good spanking. And at that

> point, of course, being our first child, I don't believe in spanking.

I have spoken of Ruddick, her perspective on maternal thinking, and have presented feminist critiques of her position. My initial readings of our transcripts were influenced by her words and entered my reflections and comments in our dialogue. Your efforts parallel her elaboration of mothers' work as preservative love, nurturance and training. Even though you didn't believe in spanking, Louisa, (and we both laughed after you had said that, for your tone and the nonverbal message you gave suggested that you had subsequently changed your mind), you did want him to "fit in." You were involved in the task of training. My heart stopped with yours as you told of the first time the kindergarten teacher called you aside. You had described how, as a member of the kindergarten Parent Advisory Council, the teacher would pull you aside "periodically" and give you "a little description" of what was going on in the classroom: "The first time I thought: 'Oh! She wants to tell me how brilliant he is." Warm, appreciative laughter burst from us both when you made that comment.

> Boy! I didn't get what I wanted to hear, I'll tell you that. Um. And I think that from then on my heart kind of stopped.

You used the word "normal" in several contexts, and later on you invigorated that problematic:

> Getting a sense of...being our first child we had no idea what normal behaviour was for a child either, you know. Like having a feel for what's normal. Like a book telling you something is normal isn't the same as having the common-sense or feel for what is normal, or what, sort of, is the right thing for this kid to be doing at

> this age.

You illustrate the tension between the socially and psychologically constructed concepts of normalcy and the dialectic that exists between conforming to those concepts and that of respecting the existential uniqueness of us all.

stand out boldly - Cyrano's story

I hope that the words from this foreward of a Citadel Theatre program, written by John Murrell the playwright, will sing to you as it did to me when I was waiting, excitedly, for the curtain to rise on the theatre's production of Edmond Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac, newly translated by Murrell:

> In turbulent 19th-century France, Edmond Rostand read about Cyrano in the historical romances which he contrived to sneak past his teachers and the family who had planned his career either as a banker or lawyer - anything but an author. Even as a boy, Rostand grieved for a France (and for a world) which was suppressing eccentricity, originality and wit, in favour of conservatism, mediocrity and grim grey pragmatism. Cyrano naturally became Rostand's life-long hero, and the inspiration for this witty and profoundly moving play - which still seeks to inspire each of us, to relish his or her own passions and peculiarities, rather than meekly submitting to the pressures of conformity and cowardice in our turbulent era.
>
> 'Stand out boldly from the crowd,' Cyrano calls to us in Rostand's voice, across the nearly four hundred years since the former lived, and the one hundred years since the latter immortalized him, 'Don't fit in, don't give in. In celebrating your

> oddness, you celebrate the astonishing variety of our species. And that variety is the reason why we can go on learning and can go on living, searching through envy and hatred, and through corrupt political systems, to find a humanity which we all can share and celebrate, with our individual oddness absolutely intact.' That is the dream (Murrell, 1994).

You have all, at different times, expressed thoughts which reflect in part the image created by Cyrano as you described your sons' early years and their unique and unexpected ways - often exciting, sometimes terrifying - of thinking and acting. Joan, the image created by your words evokes a cartoon of pursuit:

> He was always independent and from the time he could walk he was off. And you hold his hand and it was 'NO' as most kids do. But I mean he never...he was never...we never went through the mommy cling-on stage...he was out in the world and that was it. I was running behind hoping to stop any impending danger, because he was out full-steam ahead, and he still is!...Yeh, you know I had a boy who was just...he hit the world like gang-busters from the word go and here was this mother, no kidding, running behind this child: 'Wait for me. Wait for me!'

I huffed and puffed with you as you ran to catch up! However, as mothers and teachers, we may feel ambivalent about Cyrano's words. We may admire facets of our children's spirit, but we also think frequently of ways we can help our youngsters "fit in" socially and thus the injunction: "Don't fit in!" leaves us more than a little scared. Ruddick (1991) talks of the many things that we as mothers think on and then enact in our varying ways and our differing contexts. She speaks of the problematics that can arise from our different thoughts and beliefs and gathers these under three mantles of strategies that mothers cogitate about: "protection; nurturance; and training." What was exciting for me was that you shared, in your stories, details of your lives, and incidents and their effects, all of which related to these three rubrics. And thus the circle of connection between theory and practice was reiterated and confirmed. In examining the relationship that exists between mothering and thinking Ruddick takes the philosophical perspective of the pragmatists' belief, which is neither "grim nor grey" but highlights that: "distinctive ways of knowing and criteria of truth arise out of practices" (p. 13).

the work of living in a wo/mom's world

Ruddick speaks of the three strands that she pulls from that complex skein of mothering as requirements and identifies them as work in which all mothers engage. "These three demands - for preservation, growth, and social acceptability - constitute maternal work; to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by work of preservative love, nurturance and training"(p. 17). The first demand, preservation, is one that takes initial precedence due primarily to the "prolonged physical fragility and therefore prolonged dependence on adults for (their) safety and well-being" (ibid.) You did that many times, Caroline, when you removed your infants from Bob's orbit.

This need for protection is augmented by the second requirement, that of nurturing. Ruddick alludes to the emotional and intellectual growth of children that needs nurturing and I choose to add physical nurturing, and underscore its interdependence with them. Who can partial out the effects and contribution of a back-rub or a lovingly tendered "favorite supper" into a physical, emotional or intellectual growth compartment?

Socialization into ways that are acceptable and appropriate to the group to which the mother belongs is the third requirement that Ruddick identifies, acknowledging that what is considered appropriate in one group is not necessarily acceptable in another group or culture. In your stories you all attest to that variability of acceptance. Socialization (or social acceptability) does not develop all by itself or "naturally." It comes with direction: "I use the neutral, though somewhat harsh, term 'training' to underline a mother's active aims to make her children 'acceptable" (ibid. p. 21).

I prefer the word teaching

Yes, for me, training is a harsh word. Is it because it conjures images of the harshness of treatment given to youths in the former Borstal Training Centres ? As a social worker in England I had heard some adults use the word like the Sword of Damocles, wanting to "prevent badness" in the child standing before them. In connection with mothers' work, and, as most mothers will attest it is work, I prefer to use the word teaching, even though its neutrality may be lost for some. Ayers (1993) also dislikes the word training and, contrasting training with education, he illuminates:

> Training is for slaves, for loyal subjects, for tractable employees, for willing consumers, for obedient soldiers...training is all barbed wire (p. 138).

Teachers are educators, as are mothers, and Ayers assists in amplifying the existential qualities of education to its fullest resonance:

> Education...is bold, adventurous, creative, vivid, illuminating - in other words, education is for self-activating explorers of life, for those who would challenge fate, for doers and activists, for citizens (ibid.).

Van Manen (1986) names both teachers and mothers and fathers, as pedagogues and he describes pedagogy as "both a complex and subtle affair" requiring thoughtfulness and tact. One meaning of pedagogy is the art of teaching (Universal Oxford Dictionary, 1955).

> Thoughtfulness, tactfulness, is a peculiar quality that has as much to do with what we are as what we do...Pedagogic thoughtfulness is sustained by a certain kind of seeing, of listening, of responding (Van Manen, p. 12).

In our conversations together your words convey that thoughtfulness as you were making meaning of your lives with your sons, a thoughtfulness which permeates those words as I re-visit them.

carnival and do I have a legitimate voice?

I discovered Bakhtin's life-story and writings serendipitously, last summer, and in their reading I am powerfully reminded of you Lena, and of the times we laughed raucously together. What you said and how you said it often tickled my ribs and, on reflection, I now understand the mutually shared subversive quality of our light laughter and loud guffaws. I think that we both recognized acting ability within each other and within the energy of our interaction. Your imitations of voice, look and tone and the implications of the "system people" were mistressly executed. I had written in my journal:

> The nuances and subtleties of inflection and tonal range that Lena brings to her stories and her descriptions of people are riveting. When she whined out her son Oliver's plaint I had Everymom's reaction to a whiny kid and later I was intimidated and speechless as she rasped the administrator's admonition. She reveals her own impatience with herself, and with Oliver, and we both laughed and laughed about her delivery and its content.

Bakhtin wrote:

> For the medieval parodist everything without exception was comic. Laughter was as universal as seriousness; it was directed at the whole world, at history, at all societies, at ideology. It was the world's second truth extended to everything and from which nothing is taken away. It was, as it were, the festive aspect of the whole world in all its elements, the second revelation of the world in play and laughter (in Quantz & O'Connor, 1988, p. 100).

For me, at times, our laughter represented a microcosm of carnival, and was heard across all our conversations, with you Louisa, and with Caroline and Joan. And although we have been meeting and talking together in pairs, over these months, I explained earlier in this narrative that I had not envisioned hearing your stories in a group situation. However, as your stories and our relationships have unfolded and developed, the idea of joining together for a celebration of sharing when this narrative is written has grown strong within me. We had already discussed the letters, and how they would all be sent to everyone, and when I mooted the idea of coming together you expressed interest. An image comes quickly to my mind: I have prepared a sumptuous meal, have 'cooked up a storm' and the resulting festivity becomes a mix of "Babbette's Feast," (1989); "Como Lagua Para Chocolate," (1993); and "Eat, Drink, Man, Woman," (1994); three films in which food becomes an exotic and erotic metaphor for relationships. We'll just stay with the exotic! Bakhtin enters my vision as we become carefree and ennervated. I anticipate about our future feasting and wonder what stories will be told?

Quantz and O'Connor in writing about Bakhtin's life and thoughts and his works on relationships and dialogue, talk of carnivalesque and his belief that it becomes a pivot for the release of the disenfranchised voice:

> There are (nonetheless) points in community life which permit and even encourage expression of nonlegitimated voice. One such juncture is the carnivalesque, the modern remnant of the medieval carnival...(the genre which) represents the essence of popular culture in its freest, most democratic, most social form...True carnival life is not a debased, cynical, and negative derision of marginal groups as it has been distortedly conceived in modern times, but a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive mockery aimed at everyone. When understood in its most universal sense, carnival offers a democratic, emancipatory, and transformative genre of social expression (p. 100).

Quantz and O'Connor also speak to the roadblocks for the nonlegitimated voice:

> Describing nonlegitimated voices within a community of powerfully maintained legitimated voices is made difficult by historical and ideological forces that affect expression in social dialogue (ibid.).

I wondered where your voice was, Caroline, when the psychiatrist received a letter from Roger's school saying "the other kids were *'endangered'* by him." His behaviour was fine in class but you told me that "outside the classroom he's very aggressive." You were concerned about that and would try to help him walk in the moccasins of the other. You shared your voice with me and I heard your worries:

> What really discourages ...yeah. Yeah, well the worst of it I think, I don't know,

> when I was sitting there in the office, I was thinking 'Oh boy! Here we go again.' You know. And the worst of it as well is he put him on medication.

It was not merely your ambivalence about medication but the acute financial bind in which you were then enmeshed. Do the professionals understand fully those implications?

> Well, we have no Blue Cross, we have no coverage right now, 'cos we can't afford to get it. They want the first $156 to put your application to Blue Cross and we can't do that right now.

Your mother was able to help you by paying the fifty-one dollars from her slender purse but that was only a band-aid to the ongoing financial concern. As well as having to find the money for Roger's pills, Ryan's medication would soon be paid for no longer by Fieldcrest (where he went daily to school) and then there would be both bills to be covered. Joan had a similar difficulty in juggling funds to pay for prescriptions: "I didn't have the forty dollars, though I managed to get it. I used the last forty dollars from all my credit cards..the embarrassment at the bank."

I'm still asking, is my voice on the table or on the shelf?

You have all spoken of your experiences with those "powerfully maintained legitimated voices" and, Lena, you felt cornered into an adversarial position by the school:

> And um, like I say, they just thought he didn't want to learn. That he liked being bad and frustrating them (laughs). But I felt increasingly over those years, more and more trapped and it was almost like it became Oliver and me against them.

You were told to take a parenting course:

> Excuse me, I've taught parenting courses. Yes. But you're obviously not applying it here. (That was the message?) Mhm. (Like...overt?) Mhm. By the principal and

> counsellor... And I was going over to that school two or three mornings a week and volunteering in the classroom. Um so that they would see. Yes! I *was a literate person*. I *did read* to my child. I *didn't yell at him and swat him* every time he did something naughty. But I also didn't *let him run totally roughshod over me*, too.

My underlining tells of your emphasis as you shared the story in a tone that lightly mocked their myopia.

When you told me about your "classroom observation" I wondered about that particular "legitimated voice," the school, and its perception of mother as teacher and recognition of mothers' knowing.

> Found the difficulty in that classroom there and I would speak to the teacher and the school counsellor about it. It was very non-structured. The kids came in at quarter to nine and they ran around the room and everything. The good little kids picked up their books and went to their desks, but Oliver was in a class with three other boys exactly like him. Those little brats were over fighting and jostling each other around at the coats at the coat hooks until it was time... and then it was circle time and they were doing all of this and everything (physical actions imitate high activity). And I'm sitting in the back and by nine-fifteen, I mean that kid was gone. I mean there's no way that kid was going to learn anything. He was physically wound up...and I kept asking for more structured setup, and boy, I mean that's what he would need. OK! You would come in and you would go to your desk. You don't have about five minutes to fool around and be the last kid to go to your desk and that sort of thing. So I thought those things were exacerbating things for

> him...

And then you continue and describe the result of your actions:

> but we didn't get very far in negotiating any changes. Their only answer was: 'No, then he's to go to the resource room'.

You have highlighted the unequal power relations that exist between home and educational policies which others also found when they listened to mothers and heard about their feelings of powerlessness. As a teacher you realised, as have others before you:

> Becoming a parent helps teachers to understand more the vulnerability experienced when one's child or one's self is going to be judged by others, the feelings engendered by encounters with authority figures, the helplessness of an individual faced with a complex system (Atkin et al., 1988, p. 82).

It is often difficult to burrow one's way through those complexities, isn't it? Those feelings of vulnerability and helplessness were present for you, Joan, when Lloyd was in kindergarten. Although you thought the administrator was "extremely punitive" and that he "knew absolutely nothing about children like Lloyd," nonetheless you were appalled, both by the comment he made: "he felt I had a child from hell on my hands," and by his subsequent suspension of Lloyd for one week. You were aware of the disruptive influence that Lloyd could be in the kindergarten classroom: "I understood that, but the extent that principal was out of control that day...that principal was out of control." Later you had the experience that many have had, that of being called to a school conference: "We had about six people, yeh, teachers, counsellor, psychologist, principal. I disliked that intensely." There you heard what the professionals had to say.

> And I don't like feeling like the chastised child myself, and so when his dad and I were called in... again it's like the Knights of the Round Table. You're sitting there with all these professionals around you. They're making assessments on our son and saying, you know, where they think he should go. And that's kind of a hard pill to swallow as a parent.

I was reminded of a friend who was notified of a meeting to discuss the results of her son's assessment. Her name was presented but the reverse did not occur. The professionals around the conference table remained anonymous. The meeting proceeded quickly and she had felt too intimidated to interrupt. You had that same feeling, Louisa, that your voice was silenced:

> I was only about twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old at the time and I think that, er, the authority of a teacher or a principal or whatever is very intimidating. Especially for your first time around because you're still carrying er the same kind of feelings that you had from childhood for these people. You know...and I think in a lot of cases you give them too much kind of authority and too much...I think you look up to them in a way, in a way that you shouldn't.

Later, things changed for you, and for Joan, and you found schools and teachers who were supportive and helpful:

> So we brought him into grade three and Oh! he had a wonderful teacher. She was marvellous. She was really...really... and she was so good to Nate. She tried everything. She just tried everything for us with him. And I was going in about once a week, you know, to talk to her and usually could work something out.

That support ended after a few months when "they put him in a special classroom. Behaviour disorder classroom, that's what they call it. With a different school."

You felt the helplessness, to which Atkin refers, once more Lena, when you described to me, recently, the "great summer" that Oliver had had, with many "neat happenings." Unfortunately he became unwell after a few weeks and was unable to shake his bad cold and cough, "I had him at the doctor's several times and she gave him some medication." You had informed the school, giving the reason for his absences but you were told that this was not enough and that you had to provide confirmation of your visits to the doctor. You told me how you had gone home and "stewed about this. It's all happening over again." You thought to yourself:

> Yes. New principal. She's probably read through his enormous fat file and read all those things that have been said about him and me and she probably thinks I'm a neglectful parent, lying around drinking, who's just not bothering to send him to school. I felt sick. It brought it all back to me.

The weight of pain re-entered your life, having left it for almost a year and a half. "But I probably over-reacted." When you went to the doctor for confirmations of those appointments she commiserated in a confiding tone: "Oh! My son's been sick too and has missed a lot of school. He can't seem to get rid of this cold." "Yes," you replied, "but you are a doctor and your son's not in a BD class."

just what is the last straw or is it a chicken and egg issue?

I have worked in countless different schools and have been fortunate to know many dedicated and creative teachers, principals, and consultants, as friends and colleagues. We would agree that, frequently, it appeared to be merely circumstantial which youngsters would be placed in segregated classes because of their behaviour. Jordan behaves like an "angel" in Ms. Z's class, a "devil" in Mrs. X's, and "half-way between" in Mr. Y's. And in each school there would be numerous Jordans. We would discuss all the different possibilities of influence. It was difficult to know which was critical. Was it the Jordan who was bright but always bored? The Jordan whose anger spilled over to include all women, or, conversely, all men? The Jordan who had been sexually abused? The Jordan for whom this was the seventh school in three years? The Jordan whose family was living well below the "acceptable" poverty line? The Jordan who could read hardly at all yet whose spoken ideas reflected well-understood concepts? The Jordan whose parents had a drinking problem?

We could have gone on and on. We did, taking another tack. Was this professional more likely to accept the perspective and the opinion of one principal, family, consultant, teacher, or doctor more than that of another? And if so, would that all-important piece of paper be signed? Was the piece of paper merely a passport to more dollars? Did this mean the student would receive the identified and needed help? And if the student was placed in a class where his peers had similar behaviours what chances did he have for modeling ways that might lead to more success in peer interactions? What did that success look like? And what if his circumstances, both in and outside school, remained the same? And what about those neuro-transmitters in his brain, could they fluctuate and change when a kind word was spoken or were their levels fixed and determined?

Our discussions were lively as we debated the "chicken and egg" issue and mixed our metaphors (a deadly sin!) as we wondered which was the last straw that broke the camel's back. And who was the camel? Was it the teacher or principal, the psychologist or psychiatrist, the family doctor, the mom or dad, or the labeled child? Was Jordan's voice, in all its intensity, heard fully? Where was Jordanette and why was there such a huge gender discrepancy in BD identification (ninety-two/eight percent)?

I mention the "chicken and egg" dilemma because we discussed it at different times, Lena. The pile of copied reports of assessments that you showed me were pretty devastating to read, weren't they, with page after page of observed, or reported, disruptive behaviours documented? In the most recent one, written by the psychiatrist from the hospital where he was admitted for a three week observation, it was again identified that Oliver was a student with an IQ that falls in Superior range, but that he has " a significant learning disability." You have given me permission to quote from the report that was sent to you:

> It is this learning disability which has most likely manifested itself in symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder in school. He needs to have his special learning problems addressed if he is going to succeed in the school system.

You had felt this "in your bones" all along, hadn't you? You knew that he was a bright youngster and you couldn't understand why he was having such difficulty with reading and writing. Was Oliver encouraged by learning that "he is highly motivated to learn but has met mostly frustration in his attempt to do so thus far" ? And does it change your life with him knowing that the severity of his disorder "does at some level have a neurological basis and is not simply due to lack of motivation?" You're now in a "Catch-22" situation because your school district requires that, to receive academic assistance for the severity of his learning disorder, there must be no behaviour problems.

Lloyd has been assessed as being a very bright boy, too, and he has also experienced learning difficulties which worry you, Joan. You don't understand why he seems to be having such a hard time learning to read. You have just learned that he "may be learning disabled" and you hope that the doctors at Fieldcrest may be able to help you. "After all" you told me, "he's been going there for two years. They ought to be able to tell me something." You had been worried about the curriculum when he had been placed in a segregated setting:

> ... at first I was against it because I did not... I was thinking of the 'old special ed' classes when I was in school ... these kids were always outcasts, they were laughed at in school. And I didn't want that kind of stigma with my son. But they told me it was different and they still have a curriculum... there's a curriculum I still want him to follow. I do not want his academics to suffer strictly because you're trying to focus on his socialization skills.

You and Lena both continue to wonder did the disruptive behaviours exacerbate because of your sons' frustrations with their perceptions of themselves as learners?

I return to the discussion with my colleagues in education. As we tended to be like-minded our general opinion, based on our experiences and our thinking and feeling about those experiences, was that inclusion rather than exclusion was best for the student, as well as being morally right, provided the teacher had the necessary supports. Those last two words seemed critical for all of us. The words reminded me of the time I was visiting a segregated class of eight students many years ago. There, the nature of the support referred to above was present: a calm, caring woman, an aide to the teacher, who respected and understood student differences and who joined a teacher with similar qualities. I have known many others whose relationships illuminate the three C's of caring, concern and connection to which Martin refers (1994).

The reality of inclusion/exclusion kept confronting me as over the intercom came a loud reminder about the first flag-football noon-time activity. "Am I allowed to go?" a nine-year old asked eagerly. Permission was given. I pondered. Here was a student, placed in a segregated class because of disruptive behaviours and provided with close monitoring and "strict limits," about to participate in a large group sport where the rough-and-tumble of the physical activity and competition led frequently to frayed tempers. The football games, enthusiastically attended by many, were supervised by one staff member only. Eight weeks later I asked him how things had gone. "He fitted in like a glove. Not one problem. Wished there'd been more like him."

You received a similar comment, Joan. We had been discussing your observations and feelings about Lloyd's temperament, the early aggressiveness that you saw and his seeming motivation to "take on the world." You were hesitant, initially, when I asked you to tell me more about what you saw when he played hockey:

> He's actually...fairly good. It doesn't take much to set him off. But in the first year of hockey, um, Lloyd was very aggressive. Because they all think they're Wayne Gretzky and you know they can't even really skate. But they (coaches) curb that right away. Lloyd's not aggressive on the ice. And actually, it's like looking at a different child sometimes, 'cos he can certainly be in the playground.

> But what I found though is that their frustration tolerance is so low, and it's, you know, they're the first ones to have this persecution complex, I call it. So, if for example, he thinks that something unfair has been done to him on the ice, he'll go whining to the coach, and he'll get antsy and hit his stick on the ice and he'll pout.

You saw what had occured following a minor incident on the ice and the way the coach had handled it and you praised the coach for his "wonderful way to deal with my son."

> He laughed and he said: 'You know he might be labeled whatever but he's no different from any of these other boys. They all have to learn the rules.'

I asked you to which labels the coach referred: "They all know that he's hyperactive and attention-deficit but not the other stuff. But I did say to him, I reiterated: "He can be very defiant."

> Well, whatever label they have, really, he's no different from what I've seen in my twenty years of coaching. They're all something like that.

yes, it can be very scary

Karyn, a teacher friend, caring, concerned, and ever-mindful of the "lethality of labels" (her words), shared with me her reaction when her classroom door opened and a new student was ushered in. "He's funded behaviour disordered" she was told, "we have no further information at the moment, but his cumulative record should arrive soon." Her warm, welcoming smile had scarcely reached its width when the young fellow darted forward to a nearby desk and snatched a pair of scissors. Legs astride he held the scissors aloft and shrilled: "Don't come near me!" She was able to defuse his anger but what upset her most was her own inner initial reaction. All the stereotypes that she had heard about behaviour disordered students rushed to her thoughts and at that moment she was unable to see him as his own person.

My awareness is that, in moments of crisis when issues of safety and protection are paramount, our responses may surprise us. I remember times when sudden rage would overcome a student and I or a teacher colleague would have to protect ourselves from a bite, kick or punch. At those times our own fear and anger were more likely to surface and mingle with entrenched stereotypes.

> Children's strong negative emotions can cause staff to withdraw or become irrationally over-involved with the child who has just run away, hit, or lied. Staff reactions may vary along a range of strong feelings, including anger, helplessness, shame, guilt, fear, and confrontation with their vulnerability (Cotton, 1993, p. 260).

I was fortunate as, most often, I had the opportunity of meeting youngsters in non-crisis situations when we were able to engage in conversations and dialogues and where those feelings were allowed to surface and I was privileged to hear their stories of themselves.

As I read Cotton's words I realised that the varied reactions of staff were also the varied emotions, contained and uncontained, in the responses of parents, and in those of the labeled BD child. Robert Coles, a psychiatrist and a powerful teller of stories, won the Pulitzer prize for his book "Children of Crisis" which scribes the complexities of many youngsters' lives (1988). In the Foreward to Cotton's book, he tells the story of an angry, assaultive young boy who impacted him with these words: "You think you're such a big shot, but I can see right through you - you're just as scared as I am!" Coles, realising that this was so, links his thoughts in the Foreward with Cotton's choice of title for her book

"Lessons from the Lion's Den." Her experiences as the director of a child psychiatric inpatient unit are not only superbly told but, on reading them, the wisdom, compassion, patience and understanding, of the often seemingly incomprehensible, shown by her and all her colleagues to the young lions in their care, shine through the detritus of the den. Their youngsters are:

> the disconnected, sad, and angry lions in the playing fields and classrooms of childhood. We want them to keep their lion strength, passion, and aggression, within the treatment settings and strategies we create for them. We don't want them to abandon the inner lion but to befriend and tame it (p. 33).

Few of us want our children to be violent and aggressive and ongoing, constant, entrenched aggression in the classroom and the playground exposes all to danger, including the aggressor. You were upset, Caroline, when told of Roger's aggression on the playground and both you and Hank tried to help him to talk about his feelings and it was difficult because he seemed unable to "open up." Louisa, you had told me of the time when you withdrew Nate from swimming lessons because of his non-listening to the instructor:

> It was a warm, sunny day, it was during the summer. I said OK fine. You go over and you play in the park. And I locked all the doors and windows in the house. I was gone an hour and a half. And I came home and the front window was taken off, like the storm window, and he had gone in the house and he had friends in the house. And he had taken a knife and he had, you know, the corners of the walls and he had even chopped into my frig, He had chopped down the sides of my frig this deep. (Louisa showed me). And I mean there wasn't a big fight before I left,

> there wasn't enough anger had gone on to cause that kind of reaction.

We often wondered together, Louisa, where the source of Nate's anger lay. You had told me that he was not aggressive: "He never has been a real physically aggressive person. No. He would do things, but no, he would never...not to hurt somebody. He wasn't that kind of person." You wrote more about our conversation after you had read through that transcript: "I guess that's one of the really good things about Nate - he doesn't like for people to be hurt." You wanted him to know that "home is a place that you cherish and you don't abuse" but, even after he returned from the group home, things didn't change. You felt that he was trying to get back at you but were unsure what that was about. I was too and we delved no further on that occasion. Much later, in another conversation, we did, and after talking things through we both decided to leave that story unwritten.

You were worried, Joan, about Lloyd's impulsive and aggressive responses, especially on the playground. You later wrote: "Lloyd has matured tremendously on the playground. I see him now as a participant in games and following the kids' lead. He is not nearly as aggressive as when he was younger." I felt your sigh of relief. You want his strengths to remain without a need to strike out and you try to help him develop a sensitivity to the feelings of others. You felt the same, Lena, and I received your pride when you related how upset Oliver had been when he had watched his oldest sister act in a play where her role was maligned. He told you that he didn't like to see his sister being hurt. Nonetheless you worry about him and his eagerness to "waltz right in."

> Like I say the one thing that does concern me now is one of his friends (has an) older brother Joe who's in his teens...and Joe's got a lot of these posters and he's

> got all these tough friends. And "he's got a friend who's actually got his own gun."

When Oliver told you that, you tried to encourage him to "play around our house a little more" because you are very aware of his propensity to be the "kid on the edge." You continue to talk to him because "he really feels, and that's why I gave him an extra little stroke this morning...he's making a real effort to do the right thing...(I'll say) 'Hey! That's good. Let's keep it up.' And then go on, because he can't stand false praise." You then exaggerated a smarmy tone of false praise which oozed the touch of phoniness that most youngsters pick up immediately.

Cotton talks of the key place that communication has in working with "troubled and troubling children."

> *More than any individual message we will ever convey, it is the communication of our wish to hear the children and to have them hear us that they will feel and remember* (p. 88) [author's italics].

You have all been working hard at helping your sons to maintain their strengths and also to "accept the legitimacy of all feelings - the positive, the negative, and the ambivalent - so that they can distinguish between feelings, fantasies, and actions" (ibid.).

> Taming lions start with respect for the lion. It requires skill, patience and love. We offer ourselves to our patients as teachers and temporary lion keepers, until they can become their own (p. 2).

Intensities of passion and anger can be very scary and most of us have experienced them in ourselves. Taming those intensities yet maintaining their strengths requires subtleties of understandings and an awareness of the responsibility to assist in the blossoming of our unique children.

persevering with the professionals

I had written the word "meeting" when a puce-colored Post-it, at the level of my eyes, reminded me that: "All living is meeting." These are the philosopher Buber's words (1958, p. 11). Buber writes of our need to move from an I-It relationship to an I-Thou relationship, both with God and with each other, woman and man.

> They are pointers to the human situation, in its intricate interweaving of the personal and the impersonal, of the world to be 'used' and the world to be 'met' (Smith, 1958, p. ix).

For you, Joan, the relational quality referred to by Buber was experienced during the last two years and you found it not only supportive but honoring and appreciating your way of being with Lloyd.

> You know, everybody knows everybody really well there. I walk into the school and everybody knows immediately who I am. They must have three hundred there. There's that individual caring, and it's right down to the custodian who Lloyd's great buddies with...it's wonderful. It's almost like a family setting and I feel fortunate when I see what help and support that I've had for my child compared to other people who've had nothing and who have gone through so much pain...I've had nothing but support from any professionals that I've ever dealt with.

That surely eased your responses to Lloyd.

Talking with other students, around the Centre for Education's "kitchen table," about "professionals" and "professionalization" and what that meant to us all, inevitably led to discussion about "experts" and "expertise." Their distancing hovered above us as we spoke. "As a professional..." is a frequent introduction, often prefacing a pontifical opinion. I wonder why this is? For many students a desired goal after completing university is to belong to a profession, to join others engaged in similar endeavours and to experience collegiality, while getting their professional feet wet; yet no-one wants to be thought pontifical, except perhaps the pontiff.

> For Strike (1991), a profession is characterized by possession of an esoteric knowledge base, substantial training for entrance, a professional organization which speaks authoritatively for the occupation, a code of ethics, significant autonomy, and an orientation to client welfare (in Howard, 1994, p. 135).

An early definition of professions addressed divinity, law and medicine as the three learned professions, with the military as a profession added to this (as non-learned?). Throughout history these were the "status" professions of the patriarchy. Contemporary extensions of "occupational" professions range from computer programmers and recreational therapists to aestheticians and animal trainers; recently "hit-men" have been elevated to their ranks with a film entitled "The Professional" (1994). The spectre of exclusion and distancing remain and in respect of the last mentioned profession I am grateful. The grudging inclusion of women into the (now broader) "status" professions continues its varied snail-speed progression. Lest I be misunderstood, I, too, seek professionals and recommend to others that they do likewise when I have no knowledge or experience in the particular area in which I seek assistance. But I have learned to be cautious and I ask, of them all, the "question behind the question" (Jaffé & Zeitner, 1993).

But does the possession of esoteric knowledge, that private, confidential information given only to the initiated, ensure an expert? Experiri (L.) means "to experience" and "expert" means "having experience (of)," and "trained or skilled by practice." From those definitions "expertise" is the quality of being an expert. When I journeyed to discover those meanings and heard the words "quality" and "practice" perhaps I should relinquish my distress about the distancing and exclusionary aspects of professionalism, recognize its power for the generation of new knowledge, and focus on its dialogue and relationship. I wonder if my distress stems from the dismissal and non-recognition of the knowing outside the boundaries by those from within?

> All professionalization assumes as its baseline the existence of expertise. Expert knowledge assumes specialized knowledge and the ability to exercise social distance from the phenomena studied. Specialization also assumes a specific focus, and to be 'special' this knowledge must possess uniqueness and identifiable differences from other specialties (Sullivan, 1984, p. 121).

"I am the professional; I am the expert; I know" is the attitude toward them felt by many non-experts, and I return again to the question-whose knowledge? whose practice? Teaching, nursing, and social work, with exceptions in the first-mentioned, have been occupations composed historically of females. They have been acknowledged as professions only comparatively recently. Most administrative and executive positions are now occupied by males who, even with their late arrival into those fields, have "swooshed" to those positions, reaching them with the powerful speed of an Olympic luge. Research by teachers, about their knowings and their knowledge of teaching, is being recognized by academics and has even been admitted to their professional ranks. Mothers' knowledge, in contrast, carrying with it the socially constructed overlay of sentimentality and sacrifice ascribed to motherhood, is heard "en passant," often listened to through a filter of pre-judgments by half-blocked ears.

Can it be that these paragraphs are my long-winded introduction to your relationships with professionals? It's as though I have to clear my uncertainties before I am able to present our conversations. I entered the research as a co-researcher, unfamiliar with the nuances and subtleties of narrative inquiry. During my years of work outside my home I did not want to be thought of as an expert, despite many years of study and practice, because I never saw myself as one. This "not seeing" helped me to come afresh to each new encounter, and listen anew, even as my own story draped like a curtain, poised to be opened or closed, fronting the window to the past and the future. I expect that it was inevitable for you all, knowing my background, that you had me "pegged as a professional, an expert" and that, too, was why I shared my story of my early teaching and my later journeys with children and families. I needed to remove those pegs so that you could share your stories with me as Joy-Ruth, the co-researcher who wanted to uncover, with you, your lived experiences.

We discussed the dilemma that occured for you all on the occasions that your stories included upsetting and negative feelings or interactions:

> And it was serious, pretty serious. And of course right away they wanted to call in the school psychologist. I mean don't take this personally.

We both laughed here Louisa, and when I said: "No. No, I won't, don't worry!" we both laughed some more, and I felt pretty sure that you were confident about being able to let me know how you'd experienced those relationships. You also told me:

> I would hope you would take whatever I said as part of well..'well maybe with my experience I need this.' That's how I would hope you would take this.

"Absolutely," I replied, (I can't escape my cultural conditioning!) and I iterated my "honest desire to know" for myself, for other moms, for teachers and for all those in schools, in education and for all professionals. Subsequently, my feeling that you would be able to tell of disquieting involvements was confirmed when you wrote a neat comment about our growing openness in dialogue. For you, there were many times that the encounters with those, other than teachers, were negative:

> And we're going on a monthly basis, and that's a ... it was terribly tedious. I mean we'd go to these monthly meetings and we'd talk about the same things and we'd go home. And nothing was accomplished.

Hidden in the "nothing accomplished" was the need for things to be different so that you could alleviate the pain and anger for your son, as well as your own. You wanted to know the why? the what? the how?

> Because they haven't got an answer. You know...psychologists. I'm having trouble with psychologists as well as psychiatrists ... It had been ... up until that point the last five years had just been a merry-go-round with psychiatrists and psychologists.

You then said something that Joan had said also, just the week before. Joan and I were talking about qualitative research and its finding "the particular, the personal." And she added: "I think it's a fascinating subject (the "BD" experience for moms) to take and put the humanity back in. Because the clinicians try to take it out." You expressed your feelings, Louisa, about the last psychologist you were involved with:

> Um ... I think ... I think in a lot of cases when you get into all this professional stuff that the human part of everything gets lost. And that's how I felt with it. That everything had to be dissected, and everything had to be looked at, and everything had to be taken apart. And I was at this point, I was tired. I was tired of being dissected. I had had enough. (and you are still [tired]?) Yeh. I am. I don't want to be dissected any more and I'm quite comfortable with ... with ... (the way you are) Yes ... Yes.

Your story of your encounters and involvements with psychiatrists, psychologists, teachers and principals has varied, Lena. When Oliver was in the first division at school you had contact with the school counsellor: "I did believe that she believed me. About some things. At least to some degree and at least I was given some credit that I was a half-decent person." The situation changed for you following a particularly harrowing experience during one of the counselling sessions that you had sought:

> Well, by then, I was really fed up with the professionals. I didn't feel they were touching what the problem was. I didn't feel that they were reading Oliver or me ... they were using the regular approach and this formula and it wasn't fitting in.

As I'm typing your words, Lena, my mind springs to those panty-hose ads, loudly asserting "One Size Fits All." As so many of us know, it "just ain't true!" You knew it. You knew it from your living with your son and your knowing of yourself.

> You know, Oliver by now was preceded by a file this thick. With all of the diagnoses...it was like I knew that we were getting put in the profile, getting put in the slots...but I was thinking to myself, god, what is this going to do for him or

> me? Reading the profile again, what? They'll come to the same conclusion again that they've already read.

You had to respond to Oliver when you saw:

> He was fed up with professionals and doctors and tests and being weird and being different...by now he hated school, he hated himself and now he hates all the doctors and all the shrinks. I'm not going back to another shrink. And I hate the drugs and I don't see why I have to take the pills...

Things became different for you both following Oliver's short stay as an in-patient at a hospital, and when, after he left, you both met a psychiatrist with whom you were able to develop a relationship, one that felt meaningful, where you both felt heard.

Your meetings and interactions with professionals have also varied, Caroline, depending on the context of your involvement. Your own initial meeting where your story seemed to fall into a black hole, from which a prescription came floating upward and out, with ne'er a word passing from the lips of the professional until the fifty-minute hour had reached its close, remains with us all. In contrast, at Fieldcrest, the treatment centre where you were referred, you met professionals with whom you were able to develop trust. The only unfortunate thing was that, as soon as you were beginning to feel comfortable and felt that you were benefitting from the insights shared, the particular social worker left the centre: "Yes. She was really good to talk to...I probably never looked at things that way." The "telling and retelling" of the same details:

> ... there's sometimes I've gone to appointments where I've had to see a few different people and then you have to tell each one. And then I get tired, 'cos I feel,

> oh, I've just finished telling this person, can't you just take it from them? And then you have to go to the next appointment and repeat yourself again and then that gets

It certainly can become tedious repeating the same information again and again, wondering if you left something out or had the details muddled and I think many moms will recognize themselves in your words. I wonder what your reaction will be, Caroline, when you read Lena's story above. She would have preferred telling her story afresh rather than having a "thick fat file' precede her at the place she sought help. However, you didn't have the feeling of being slotted into a defined container and when I asked you about your understanding of your sons you told me: "Well, I feel a lot more relief finding out exactly what's wrong and then, you know, getting it looked after." The confirmed scientific evidence of Ryan's past and current seizure activity assisted in his receiving medication to control it.

I feel that this letter has reached the point where the story of your meetings, your experiencing, and your being with professionals, both in and out of school systems, health systems, public and private, has been opened and shared for us all to see and feel. I am sure that we will ponder on the portraits and their presentations and conjure other possibilities of ways of being and experiencing. As you all know, individually, there are many other stories that you told me that could take their place here, and this is how I as the narrator, have a frightening responsibility. I hope that you will think that I have used it well.

Sincerely,

Joy-Ruth.

Knowing: mothers' ways

October/November/December 1994

Dear Lena, Caroline, Louisa and Joan,

The day we first spoke on the telephone I was aware that my voice was charged with excitement, and as we discussed my hopes and thoughts about researching together, and your questions, comments, and expectations, and, as I said before, I felt the responsiveness in your voices. The time we have spent conversing is nearing its close and the charge and excitement remain with me. I have felt this with you all and the connection that we have all made feels dynamic and vivacious. The word vivacious I use purposively; its meaning comes from the Latin verb vivere: to live. It is my belief that this vivacity springs from our joint efforts to understand something that is near to our hearts and to our living. We have been using our hearts and our minds, for, as Steinem (1992) told of the women from Appalachia: "never having learned to separate mind from body, thought and emotion, intellect from the senses, they trusted their own experiences" (p. 137). So have we trusted both ourselves and our experiences and have entrusted our stories to our readers, knowing that we shall always be adding new stories of experience that will shape and reshape the meaning we bring to them. In this letter, with your words and mine, I look at wo/mom's way of knowing.

caring, concern and connection

I chose the word connection, and associated it with a vital, living quality, influenced by my years of practice. Beginning with my first year of teaching, and during the years that followed, my belief grew stronger: If connections were not made, with children and their families and with colleagues, situations remained static; little learning or teaching occurred; and the opening of alternate ways of being remained closed. In the story of my early teaching I called the group of children I cared for "my own little home," and in the letters to you I have mentioned "teacher as mother and mother as teacher" many times. My own mother spoke to me about Maria Montessori when I was thirteen and I remember rushing to the local library to search out books by and about her, and they were numerous. I read them and learned of her beliefs about a nurturing home-like environment as essential for learning and living for peace, and I bless my mother for her introduction.

In her book "The Schoolhome" (1992) Martin reminds us of Montessori's philosophy and practice, and its importance to the learning environments that we create today:

> When and only when there was a 'harmonious interaction' between individual and environment, she said, would the child develop normally and love flourish. The kind of love Montessori had in mind was neither the romantic love of poetry and novels nor the self-sacrificing kind that Western culture attributes to mothers. Permanent and unconnected to either selfishness or a desire to possess, it was directed to all living creatures, to people, and to objects (p. 20).

Martin elaborates further the thoughts and learning practices necessary for a humane society. Highlighting the three C's of caring, concern, and connection as essential vertical strands, she weaves Montessori's beliefs about "domestic tranquillity" and "the abolishment of war" into an articulately presented philosophical tapestry for our currere. By designing the right curriculum for boys and girls Montessori believed that war could be abolished. Martin knows that the Schoolhome "has its work cut out for it" with the need to teach to "a new form of citizenship":

> Understanding that although our children may see the world differently they live in the same world, it (the Schoolhome) is committed to providing them with an education for living *together* (p. 203).

Unlike the Bayeux tapestry of old, with its depiction of war and destruction, albeit with creative crafting, colors and design, Martin's tapestry tells the story of inclusion, collaboration and peace.

Montessori, as Martin points out to us "was well aware that not all homes are safe and loving" (p. 12) and it is here that I want to make the connection between these philosophers' words and yours, for I am trying to reflect the importance of their words without diminishing them by paraphrase. Your knowing enabled you to make decisions that were difficult for you and your children. Decisions that were filled with uncertainty and held little promise of economic security or social sanction. You carried them through knowing that your children would have a chance of growing in an environment that was more tranquil, loving and safe or one that would enable different ways of learning to be-in-the-world. And you carried them through with love and courage.

daunting decisions

You and Caroline, Louisa, had the daunting decision of agreeing to temporary alternate living arrangements for your sons. Caroline, you had to leave a home and a relationship that was violent and unsafe for you and for both your sons, and when Ryan was so deeply troubled, you knew that you were unable to provide the environment that he needed *at that* *time*. You said that you swore at him a lot "It's no wonder where he got it. I know where he got it! From his mother." And we both laughed, knowing that many moms swear, I do, too; and that if we want our youngsters not to swear our own language has to be "squeaky clean." But you were worried about yourself and the possibility that, in your frustration, you would hurt Ryan badly. In this too, you are not alone, the feelings of frustration that surge within us are frightening and when they ally with anger, old messages, and experiences, they are doubly so. Ruddick writes of the "ordinary/extraordinary pleasures and pains of maternal work" (1989, p. 29) which, for many women, "begins in a fiercely passionate love that is not destroyed by the ambivalence and anger it includes" (ibid.). When you were close to "losing it" Caroline, you bravely called for help: "Come and get him" you called to his grandparents, for you felt close to harming him. Grounded in your practice as a mother, you knew that he had to be protected from your feelings and intentions *at that time*.

Louisa, you were worried about your reactions to Nate's behaviours: "I was afraid I was going to lose it."

> I went to Family Services because I was afraid I was going to start hitting him. I was afraid that I was going to beat this person and I was afraid... I really thought that I was an awful person and that I was a terrible mother.

Society's script for the "good mother" does not jibe with the work of mothering and its day-to-day ongoing demands, and many of the sanctimonious messages delivered verbally or in print guarantee guilt. The relentlessness of the daily reminders of your sons' troubling behaviours, the continuing cycle you called it, Louisa, contributed to the stresses you were all experiencing. Making those decisions for yourselves and your sons' protection was courageous, knowing that you would be subject to the scrutiny of those unconnected to your lives, and even those connected; a scrutiny which veils, only thinly, the spectre of blame and failure which you already felt and which needed no reinforcing from others.

Your experiences with counselling, which you had chosen Lena, had left you feeling very upset: "I was raw. I was tired. I was fed up," and Oliver didn't want to go to the sessions, neither with you nor his dad, nor when the whole family went. A couple of times you had to "pull him out of the car by the scruff of his neck to go there." When that had happened Oliver "would display real hyperactive ADD" The sessions were videotaped and observed behind a one-way mirror:

> But I wasn't about to appear too stern, because I had the label of "potentially abusive mother." So I wasn't going to go and grab him... So I er... I mean, I let go the scruff of his neck the moment I walked into that place, because you know, I didn't want any criminal charges against me sort of thing. So of course he ran rampant because he wouldn't listen to me. So of course, I'm an ineffective mother, you know...

The next time you went there you were told you were going to be taught how to control Oliver, which meant teaching you how to restrain him:

> And I mean, that, at about the age of two or three, that would just send him in a rage. So, um, the minute Oliver started doing something negative, mouthy or something: 'OK. Now, Lena, tell him that's not acceptable.' Oliver would mouth back and it would be 'OK. Now hold him.'

I want you to tell your story of this experience, which was traumatic and violent for you both. As you were telling it to me our heightened emotions were tangible and the physical shaking which engulfed you there, reappeared at my kitchen table.

> It ended up one of the most horrific experiences of my life, you know. Because they got me to have him and hold him, and you know, I've taken, I know how to do restraint and stuff; I've done it all the years and had all the courses and workshops and things. And they kept saying: 'Keep doing it! Keep doing it!' Well, it sent Oliver into a rage. We were falling off chairs, you know. And they kept saying: 'Keep holding him! Keep holding him!' He was ripping out handfuls of my hair, my glasses went flying, when I did have my plate I lost it. You know, it got knocked, and they kept saying: 'Hold harder! Hold harder! Your mom'll let you go, Oliver, as soon as you stop.' And I mean it was an horrendous long time, it must have been a half-an-hour or something, just this whole thing, the two of us flying all over this room. My hair was flying, I didn't know whether I was bleeding, whether my glasses were broken, you know... Finally ended up with him being totally spent...

We were both spent as we sat silently trying to sort out how to make meaning of all that.

recurring, relentless

I have immersed myself in your words and the shanks of your stress have poked and presented like shards of ice. Their points have pierced my heart as they have yours. You have given in trust and it is with an ethic of trust that I return your words. I present them to you as an amalgam, a chutney, a mix of stressors which you all named and which you have felt so deeply. They were presented in the past and some are now 'old stories.' We pray they so remain. I tell of these stressors in a single voice unifying its multi-vocal origins and knowing that other words and stories appear and I have heard them and their future.

Cycle comes goes comes goes comes
again the nightmare starts; again pulsing.
Our lives a whole new book the pages ripped.
Anger rises, climbs quickly daily, back to a beginning that won't or will be better;
is that my voice screaming, my hand raising? I shake and I am shaking
my plate is full and spills the pills   I can't erase the stain. No job no cash
I am betrayed.

my ear   my ear   my ear   In black night pain screams worse. My scream in pain
back in my gut my mind my soul my purse (empty of bills and bits) my heart
of blood.
My plastic cards erased. Even the dreaded Tylenol cannot be bought or brought.
Empty drones the voice
Account Closed.

my ear my ear my ear my ear.
No cans, no bread, no milk. All to buy with bouncing cheque that bounced
and then to top it all he bounced the bed and punched the wall. By police removed
the echo stays
the room empties his smell of rigged distance.

bugging bugging bugging bugging bugging bugging bugging. Uuuugh!

buttons pushing, in out in out in out push push push. Pushed.....Aaaah!
Screams of vulgar custodian, she who calls the shots
evicts. Who will lift the baggage baggage baggage I carry with me? my shoulders sag, my guilt sinks me. I cover all the bases like a wizard Blue Jay but why is there so little pleasure? those nice things rarely happen and really I was afraid they would say he was awright and I was awrong.

Do I have to feel guilt when I don't like you
too much times? too many hates: And many nothings.
my son my son   show me...my love is hard when kicked   show me the signs of son I sometimes see and others say

I love;
son we want my sons   I do I do   I love you. ours we   I

These have been your stressors, and mine as I have listened, and they have pierced my heart again while writing. But, within and around the stresses, you have found that experience is "one of the surest reservoirs of knowledge" (Goodrich, 1993). Knowing calls us from within and your reaching into that source has released a strength for agency and praxis. Through our connection and my immersion in your words I uncovered that strength of wo/mom's ways of being/knowing. I then realised that this was "the embodied nature of personal practical knowledge" (Johnson, 1989), embodied for you as women and as mothers. You have shown these ways of knowing with words that Goodrich joined, words that tell "of joy and worth, of doubt and faith" and with your own words of hope.

Lloyd was just over eighteen months when you took him to the local health clinic for immunisation, Joan. It was there that you were told: "You know, if you were any other way with that child you would really have your hands full." We delved into the nurse's supportive comment:

> I think she meant that, I think she was praising me. Like what she said to me was if I wasn't the kind of parent that I was ... I guess I just interpreted it in maybe my own way which could have been different from the way she meant. My... my feeling that I got from it was that I guess I was calm and consistent and er really loving and I, ... I just know Lloyd so well that I suppose I could handle the way maybe... maybe because you become a master (mistress?) of distraction and things like that when you have kids that are busy.

We discussed the art of side-stepping.

When you were feeling really low, Joan, and everything seemed to be "coming apart" you knew yourself well enough to take action: "I whine, I mope, I... And I had what I call a mini-breakdown. ... I'll cry for, you know, a half-hour or so and feel sorry for myself and then I pull my socks up and go on." And you had the persistence needed to tell others "Look! I know my son better than you do." In telling of the traumas of your mother's and grandmother's childhood, as well as your own, and in what you see as the "intergenerational dysfunction" you are determined to "call a halt." You referred to the past:

> It's an old movie now. But it's basically a movie about a woman who grew up dancing for everybody, and you know, you get to the point where you just can't

> dance any more... the generational problems we've had before will not continue. I will not try to win my mother's approval and love any more, because it just never seems to be enough... I would love to have a little girl. But I was very determined that had I had a girl that there would have been even more responsibility on me to break the cycle.

You made the assertion that "you set boundaries" and you "took ownership."

There was a time for you and your husband, Louisa, when Nate was six, that "we didn't know what we were doing. We were bouncing around...and reading more books, and reading more books...and trying to figure out." As a way to deal with his temper tantrums one doctor had recommended that you remove everything from his room except the mattress. "We never did it. We didn't do it. It didn't fit right, I guess, and I thought this is really funny." You did follow his advice subsequently but it was not successful for you and your family. Your knowing of Nate was, and still is, that he's "a very adaptable person and he adapts to whatever situation is presented to him and he seems to be able to meet whatever challenge you offer him." I reflected that this quality of adaptability holds great promise for living in our ever-changing world and the energy needed to meet this challenge is aspired to by many.

You mentioned the value of hindsight and connected it with the time it takes to understand and realise and appreciate children's differences. Practice needs practise:

> I mean if he's late for school, or if he's late coming home from school, (yeh) like how awful is this? And if he does nudge somebody in the classroom you know... it's really not that terrible... I mean with my second one I was still a little bit

> nervous, too. And with my third one, like it's on a scale of one to ten you know... and it just makes things a lot easier to deal with and it makes people a whole lot more comfortable.(yeh, yeh) But I mean, it doesn't happen overnight learning all those things. So I think in a lot of cases with Nate, we... we really overreacted.

We both questioned those "high expectations" you spoke of having and my smile was one of remembering as you told of arranging the Fisher-Price little people in an orderly fashion on the toy shelf in Nate's room because it bothered you when he "dumped all his toys in the middle of the floor."

> So I used to have to go in and reset it. I didn't mind setting, actually, I kind of liked setting up the little shelf, but there would be so much stuff all around all the time... and er, he just didn't want to pick it up... he wanted to make the mess and play in it and that was fine. But the picking up was the really difficult thing.

We wondered where those expectations of orderliness in a toddler came from and connected them with your questions about "what is normal?" We discussed "Tidy for you could mean untidy for me and vice versa" and you mentioned: "My home was never tidy, even my home (now) is never spic-and-span."

> But then, you see, there were things I hadn't learned either. Like 'Let's make a game out of this.' (Yeh, like you do this part and I'll do this. Now it's your turn and now it's mine?) Yes. And I hadn't learned that yet. Um...(And so, did you expect instant obedience?) I think so. Yes. I think so. My parenting now is so different than what it was then.

And then you said that your youngest son doesn't pick things up "too well, not too well at all."

> But it's not that big a deal now as it was then, either. (uhuh) And I'm sorry for that you know? But ...but I also understand that, that I'm just like everybody else and I just had to learn how to do that. (yeh) I just had to learn.

Our capacity for learning increases with reflection, doesn't it? And you've shown us this, with your words. And as I think about the differences that you have all shared as you have described your experiences of your unique sons and your different ways of being with them it confirms, for me, that your constructed knowledge is well grounded in your practice.

You understood Roger's wishes and needs for privacy and the protection of his personal treasures and you acted accordingly and ensured they were safe. You knew Ryan well enough to know when to say: "Listen, you know, I need help again, can I come down?" When group counselling was suggested for you, you knew yourself well enough to say that it was not right for you at that time.

Your confidence in yourself, Caroline, and the confirmation of yourself as an able, practical, and nurturing woman and mother, was established when you moved from the abusive relationship. You created a secure home for yourself and the boys, found a job, managed your financial affairs, and joined with the professionals who were working with you and your sons. When "things were falling apart again,"

> How quickly, in a matter of weeks it took me, how quickly I jumped onto

> everything right away. Okay, I got to go to welfare, I got to this, I got to take the cheques back over... had everything done in a matter of two weeks. I'd got umpteen million appointments...It was easier the second time than the first time. Because the first time I was kind of green.

Caroline, you wrote me a stirring passage and I will be asking for your permission to include its words in the next letter. You had told me earlier that your life is running smoother now, on a more even keel, and that things would never be the same: "After all the baloney I've been through, it's very easy for me to say that now...I won't tolerate it." You also know that, for yourself and for Roger, trust in relationships is something that will take the energy of reflection and action, to build and liberate.

Le Guin (1989) in her essay "The Fisherwoman's Daughter" debunks the "books or babies myth" for women, the myth that says that you can't be an artist and have children and the "theory that (their) acceptance of the 'role of mother' invalidates them for public, political, (or) artistic responsibility." (p. 235) She also opposes the exclusionist position of those feminists who continue "to declare that it is 'virtually impossible for a heterosexual woman to be a feminist" (p. 234). LeGuin states that their rationale is "the material privilege and social approbation our society grants the heterosexual wife, and particularly the mother, prevent her solidarity with less privileged women" (p. 235). On the contrary, LeGuin says, it is from her experience that she has been aware of the "life-saving necessity" of feminism to women "trapped in the wife/mother role."

> What do the privilege and approbation accorded the housewife-mother by our society in fact consist of? Being the object of infinite advertising? Being charged

> by psychologists with total answerability for children's mental well-being, and by the government with total answerability for children's welfare, while being regularly equated with apple pie by sentimental warmongers? As a social 'role,' motherhood for any woman I know, simply means that she does everything everybody else does plus bringing up the kids (ibid).

She responds to those who tell her that she is "supporting the Superwoman syndrome" by asserting that this is society's asking and expectation, not her own. She believes that women can have children and be creative.

The Superwoman syndrome is an impossible one to attain and who wants to anyway? Did you Lena? You were already being a super wo/mom and remained one when you gave up an administrative position (neat clothes/good pay) for one that was "not held in high regard" but gave you the freedom (?) to be at home when the school called, and remain there when Oliver was suspended for five school days, and again, and again. Caroline, on those bitter, blustery mornings when you were cajoling and half-carrying Ryan in your arms wending your way to the bus-stop, with Roger trailing in your footsteps, to take them both to day-care prior to going to your cashier's job at the supermarket, did you realise you were a super wo/mom? And Joan and Louisa, both being superwo/moms and working and not working, and keeping school conferences and doctor's appointments and swimming lessons and hockey games and cubs and cadets and the list goes on, I wonder what you thought? And Louisa, when the "wonderful guy" placed in your home twice a week to observe how you were interacting with your child told you that he couldn't help you because you were "doing just great," did you feel like a Supermom after that vigilance? I think that you were what you were and you are what you are and you will be what you will be.

In "Heroines" Goodrich (1993) takes the lives of heroines from the past and shows how their lives have been retold to compose operas, novels and film. She tells of their "unique problems" and how, even though they may delight us, they often challenge us "to forget them if we can." "What is Carmen to us?" she asks. But if Carmen came offstage and spoke to us in her own voice she "might reproach us for false assurance."

> You never encountered a rival at work? she might ask. You never had to earn your own living, alone, in a big city? You never fell in love with a glamorous, but worthless lover? You never committed the slightest infraction, not even one resulting in a well-deserved speeding ticket? You never had to tell the man you love that since he struck you in the face, he may never come near you, ever again? You never had to face disgrace and lived it down? Heroines have done so, Carmen would say. They give us one lesson after another in how to survive humiliation, discrimination, and defeat (p. xvi).

Who do you think came to mind as I read those words? Courage has been on my lips many a time as I have reflected on your lives. You have known those negative nouns listed above and we can all learn much from you, for just as your sons are unique and different so are the strengths that grow from your practical knowing. They also come from your existential selves and your living, and from your words and your reflections on them, I hope to reinforce for us all those experiences which sustained and validated your sense of

Caroline, you were able to disentangle yourself and your sons from the violent tensions in your lives. Was it the anger that had built inside you, slowly, slowly, that allowed the contemplation of the possibility of an act of violence? When those thoughts entered your being you knew that you had to leave and you did. The effort and energy that this took can be understood by those who have had to move from the familiar to the unfamiliar and steer their way through uncertainty and a complex bureaucracy. Your steering was then accompanied by the white noise of criminal investigation, litigation, and incarceration of the husband whom you had left.

When the trust you found difficult to give in relationships was ruptured by your new partner, you were able to orient yourself once more through a maze of appointments and activities:

> I was sad for him. But I was glad in one way that it happened. (Tell me about that feeling.) Well, I don't know, things were so stressful. I was always worried, 'Oh shit, how many is he going to drink tonight?' It's like that was all gone. And what amazed me was how easily and how together I was in picking things up. It just came like that.

You had more than five appointments in as many days and they were all far from where you were living and you wove your way through them all: "Yeah, even with one more child added on, being alone, I was fine."

Your confidence has wavered between two opposites, hasn't it Louisa? When you heard from others "Gee! You handled that well" as you discussed with the parent group the sorts of things that had happened on weekends when Nate came home, and how the interactions with him had been experienced, you found the exchange of ideas helpful: "..er learning all those skills gives you an awful lot of confidence. I mean, with the tools you learn the confidence back." Despite those learnings and your responses: "I'm still feeling, at this point, that we're doing something wrong, you know? And I still feel that. 'At this point' referred to two years prior to our conversation in January 1994, when you still felt "like that," as though you were doing "something wrong." When you were telling me how you had felt about working while Nate was an infant and how you had found it to be "so very difficult," I had asked you about feelings of resentment:

> I'm not that kind of a person, basically, you know. I think I'm,... I'm a lot more accepting than that? I might have resented it like the day before I went to work. The day I went to work I accepted that this is what I'm doing.(mmhm) You know, though subconsciously and deep down somewhere hidden, probably I did. But I don't think I was conscious of resenting.

I noted "that's a neat capacity, do you still have it--acceptance?" and you had written back: "Yes I do, to a certain extent. But I think now I'm feeling more able to make changes or at least try. I feel more confident and powerful to try. I feel very restless when things are not pleasing me."

A year later many things have changed for you, some of which you see as critical in your relationship with Nate and with your family. He is no longer in a segregated classroom having moved into high school where "they don't exist." Who or what doesn't exist, we asked each other, the segregated classes or the students with behaviour problems? It's interesting, isn't it, how needs and categories magically disappear? I wonder who or what drives that disappearance? You, yourself, are now a full-time student and this feels like a watershed with its opening to untold horizons. This change for you has led to family reorganization including different after-school arrangements and, as you recently explained to me, if you have had a class your husband has had to go to the school to discuss Nate's timetable and progress. You noted: "All this has forever changed the dynamic in our house" and then you paused, "How to say it...I approach things differently. I don't worry or fret. I have a really good idea about what's big stuff and what isn't." The timbre in your tone held the promise of a future where your feelings of self-worth and confidence would be fully realised.

The first evening we met Joan, you told me "I'm a people person and speaking is my thing ..." and then we both did a lot of talking together and the tapes expired before we did! You continued: "I can adapt pretty quickly to give people what they need if I can read the situation well. Um..I can think on my feet pretty quickly which you have to do." You were referring to your job situation but when I thought about your comment, and as I listened further to your story, I came to understand that you have used your 'people person' capacity and your ability to 'think on your feet' throughout your life with Lloyd. In so doing you have been able to learn from problematic situations and have not allowed those problematics to diminish your sense of self-worth.

You have had to be "enterprising" and rent two rooms to "boarders," thereby losing some privacy in your home. You did this, as well as working "just to pay the bills and keep some consistency for Lloyd." The consistency was a component in his life that you felt to be critical for his well-being, understanding as you did, his unique style of being-in-the-world. You also emphasized that you did not want "to become a statistic as far as women who go down in their life-style." Your present partner "trusts my judgment," and you have been fortunate in your finding family physicians and a psychiatrist who have recognized your wo/mom's knowing and have given you the time/space to reflect your needs. The psychiatrist had told you: "Any time that you want to look at that (medication) as an option, you come to me. I'm not here to, you know, make your decisions." You appreciated his sensitivity to your perspective. As you had remarked to me previously, you had always "been blessed with a wonderful support system" which included friends and your father, as well as the many professionals. And your self-knowledge included, as you put it, "my inner self ... I'm very strong myself and I have...I had to be strong to keep my son going."

When you were describing your daily professional activities to me Lena, that you carried out while the children's father, who is now your former husband, stayed home with them "attempting to run the home fires," the light of your accomplishments shone through and braced your body and voice in their telling. You had written an instructional series for colleges, based on your practice of working with, and meeting the individual needs of, a particular group of adults and you had travelled across the continent presenting your words. The satisfaction of your profession was constantly juxtaposed against the pattern that, as you described it later, "escalated over the years." The pattern of having a young son who would "refuse to go in the classroom, tip the desks, refuse to be part of group projects and would get quite mouthy with teachers."

> Um ... like I say, he was having greater and greater difficulty with that, 'cos I mean the other children were learning to read and write and he wasn't. But he had this tremendous little brain going at about a hundred miles an hour and wanted to talk

> about metamorphosis and butterflies and whatever, and he kept getting put in the lower and lower group, "the dumb group" as he would say, "the dumb kids."

His self-deprecating tone was imitated with ease as you thrust his words at me and a distant background chorus sounded in my ears as those youngsters who also saw themselves as "dumb kids" bewailed their similar exclusions.

Your interest in the theatre appears in your children also. Your oldest daughter has been in many community productions and Oliver has been an avid spectator. "And it's exciting ... you know and he likes to know everybody in the cast.. And they all like him, because he is so precocious and interesting and er verbal." From the audiotape of the show Oliver improvises impromptu scenes: "So there are a couple of stories from that that Oliver just loves and he puts them on and we sing together." The previous summer he "sat through two, no, I think three performances of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.' At another theatrical performance you told of seeing his psychiatrist in the audience:

> And she's lovely, I really like her and stuff. And I mean we came in full of this baggage, and I mean it took a while. And I told her I was involved in theatre and stuff, and I loved it when she saw him, you know, walking around the theatre, like, you know, not like he owned it, just that he was very comfortable there, talking to a lot of the other cast that he had already met.

You told him to go over and say 'hello,' which he did, and you remembered "feeling actually quite smug." You felt that it validated you as a person, and you as a family. "Yes. I'm not kind of wallowing in the mire. I'm down at the Auditorium for goodness sake!" Which brings us full circle to the request you made for Oliver, Lena: 'Let me bring a video of him playing with his buddies, you know. Why not talk to the neighbours?'

This letter opens, for all, that part of a wo/mom's knowing that has become part of her bones. You are surviving the stresses of your experiences, understanding that the future is as uncertain as was the past when it was the present, and valuing yourselves in the strengths that we have uncovered. My next letter will reflect on many things and I look forward to sharing it with you.

Sincerely,
Joy-Ruth.

Reflections and futures

November/December 1994

Dear Joan, Lena, Louisa and Caroline,

I'm thinking about what I want to say in this letter. If I tell you it's about what this inquiry has meant to me, participating with you as co-researchers, I imagine you sighing, with grins and eye-rolling: "Oh dear. Here she goes again!" You're right. I have said it many times in the letters. But do you know what it's been like to have had you in my life, daily, for more than a year? You've been like my alter egos. And four consciences, as well as my own, have been difficult for me to juggle! You've been questioning: "How could you leave out that part, it was critical for me at that moment in my life?" and querying: "Why did you think I meant that?" and joking: "Oh! Joy-Ruth, you got hold of the wrong end of the stick!" And, continuing our engaging dialogue, you have answered: "Yes, I said that, but I don't think it was as important then as it sounds now. Funny, isn't it?" And, "I feel differently now." I wonder whether all this surprises you? I expect not, because I think that I've mentioned your omnipresence in my life during our recent conversations. Then, whenever I telephoned you to set a date for our next time together, you have told me: "Well. I was thinking about you and knew you would probably be calling soon." The reciprocity and vibes felt great !

This will be the last formal letter in my narrative but not the last of our conversations together, for the date for our feasting is about to be set. It is time for me to do, once more, what I have been actively engaged in doing for more than the last twelve months, that is, thinking on your stories and on mine, and reflecting on what their telling has meant for you, and for me, as co-researchers all. I then wish to take our thoughts and reflections to our larger audience and suggest possible paths through which your particularities may be shared.

reflecting on reflecting

In the process of reflecting I have learned much, about myself and about you and your lives with your sons, and in my present reflections I must be mindful of Schon's (1992) demand that you and our audience "want to believe" that what I uncover are "not merely thoughts and feelings" gained because of the empathic relationship that we have developed, but that I have filtered these through my own "critical" awareness. He suggests the possibility that, because of my own story, I may have some understandings that differ from, or extend, your own (p. 356). We uncovered some of those differences together and I posed questions to you that swelled our conversations. Schon reminds me: "All research findings are someone's construction of reality" and that I must give voice to differing accounts of that reality. I will share those differences and the similarities in this letter.

Dewey (1938) believed that the act of reflecting is, in itself, a form of inquiry and Greene (1994) notes that Dewey's exposure to the philosopher Hegel's works and thoughts influenced significantly his philosophy about how we know what we know: "Hegel suggested to him a vision of complex, dynamic transactions between an active organism and the environment" (Greene, p. 433). From this influence Dewey sought a reconstruction of philosophical approaches fundamental to which "was an interactive, transactional orientation to the knowing activity" (ibid.). Is it a big jump, a quantum leap, from those philosophers'mighty words to the time we spent together? I think not; we were engaged in an interactive transaction and we remain earnest in trying to uncover ways of knowing.

My notebooks and Post-it notes are peppered with question marks. A troubling query often seeks illumination in the wee hours of the morning and colleagues tell me they also experience this: It is now four a.m. The question that I posed at the beginning of this inquiry has floated overhead throughout, like a translucent scrim sheet, lifting and wafting with the breeze, moving in this direction and that, the question ever there: What did the experience of living with a son labeled behaviour disordered mean to you? From your stories I will make no generalizations but will tell of similarities and differences. Many of these similarities and differences I have addressed in the preceding letters, as our reflecting has been ongoing. I am wondering now, as I ponder further, whether I will uncover new connections to new knowings and realise that should I do so, and bring patterns that were previously hidden from my view, this will be consistent with the spirit of this inquiry. Inquiry and reflection generate knowledge.

Lyons (1990) quotes these words of Nussbaum: She believes that our style of presenting our words "expresses a view of human understanding." Nussbaum was referring to the choral lyrics in Sophocles' play 'Antigone' and for the first two words of this quote I wish to substitute the words "Our stories."

> The lyrics both show us and engender in us a process of reflection and (self) discovery that works through a persistent attention to and (re)-interpretation of concrete words, images and incidents. We reflect on an incident not by subsuming it under a general rule, not by assimilating its features to the terms of an elegant scientific procedure, but by burrowing down into the depths of the particular,

> finding images and connections that will permit us to see it more truly, describe it more richly...(cited in Lyons, 1990, p. 159).

The question that I now ask myself is: What were you telling me in your stories? I fear the risk of being tautological, of repeating myself to the point of boring you and our readers to death. The last phrase sounds familiar, doesn't it? I typed those words for you earlier in this narrative. I then wondered: Do not the headings in the Table of Contents reflect our connections, patterns and themes? My answer to that is "Sure!" Some do openly, their meaning appearing on the surface, others are as clues in a crossword, requiring the effort of untangling - reasserting the process of inquiry.

Bateson, in her book "Peripheral Visions" (1994), strings stories and reflections together "to suggest a style of learning from experience."

> Wherever a story comes from, whether it is a familiar myth or a private memory, the retelling exemplifies the making of a connection from one pattern to another ... Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories (p. 11).

I told earlier of my large board which allowed me the space to play around with the patterns and connections of your words, and how I thought they might fit here or there or perhaps in another space...I discover that Bateson writes of a similar experience, for she continues:

> Sometimes a narrative which seems to fit into one category metamorphoses into another. These are all ways of learning, by encountering and comparing more than one version of experience, that the realities of self and world are relative, dependent on context and point of view. Because we live in a world of change and diversity, we are privileged to enter, if only peripherally, into a diversity of visions .. (p. 12).

My jottings have now become long lists, their length increasing steadily as I listen to your words once again. I worry whether my "critical awareness" is up to snuff. I have even made some funny little drawings resembling tic-tac-toe frames as the ghost of my measurement metaphor reappeared. I was boxing-in checks and crosses under beginning/middle/end, and circling yes/no/no/no or yes/yes/no/yes, all subsumed under headings such as: "sons' severe reading problems," "trusting relationship with professionals," "son still on medication," and "moms' strengths." I chuckled as I did that because I knew, as I was engaged in that linear process, what it would tell me. I knew it in my bones, a knowing that came not only from our year long friendship but from your stories. Connelly and Clandinin (1993) affirm this kind of knowing:

> Michael: We see ourselves working in reflective practice with a special twist, coming at it from the point of view of story and narrative. When we look at that issue, we ask what's built into the personal and professional knowledge of people. It's not something written on a piece of paper that they've passed a test on. It's something built deeply into their bones: their emotions, their intestines react. They react out of a long history of doing things in certain kinds of ways... (p. 5).

unique moms, you are the tesserae in the mosaic

My knowing, enhanced by your stories, is that you are as unique, and your experiences are as particular, as are your sons. In some stories your experiences, and understandings of them, are similar; in others not at all. And I was again reminded of my button sort and the subtlety of similarity/difference that reduced polarity yet identified difference. This occured when I thought about your early beginnings. Loneliness and isolation; families where moves or chaos were patterns; these were the early experiences that you had, Caroline, Joan and Louisa. Extreme violence, clouded by the haze of drug and alcohol abuse, was the horrendous background to the beginning years of your marriage Caroline, and your life when your children were young. Alcohol abuse also patterned the first years of your marriage, Joan, and those reasons caused you, and Caroline, to leave those relationships. You termed your marriage split as being due to "irreconcilable differences," Lena, as the fire, in the metaphor of your (ex) husband "keeping the home fires burning," fizzled out.

Financial hardships spliced through all your lives at various junctures and are still severely problematic when the unforeseen and unexpected occur:

> I told you I had to rent out rooms? (Yeh, yes.) One of them had bounced a four hundred rent payment for the month, which throws my payment out for the month...I had everything worked out and on track and he bounces his cheque, so of course, when my cheque goes into deposit they seize it to pay back the overdraft. So my Dad's coming, there's no food in the fridge ... er there was nothing ...

Caroline knows how you must have felt, Joan, because of the times when the frequencies of her being without food and her small change and hidden two dollar bills stolen and the bills and rent unpaid, all increased: "But you know, it had gotten to the point where even his parents were paying the bills. They were bringing food over, they were paying the rent..." The turbulence that this brought to your lives belied the cultural expectation of marriage and the "white picket fence" to which you both referred, Louisa and Lena; and the historical and genderized messages of how a "good mother" should be.

Your doctor told you that you should stay at home, Louisa, and you lost several jobs, "fired" because you had stayed at home when Nate was unwell in his early years. Lena, you could not manage being called at work, constantly, and being told: "Come and get him." It's upsetting isn't it, to receive those calls at work, as Joan can tell us:

> My girl-friends that I worked with, we would all be looking at the clock. Like by three-o-clock everyday, there was a certain time that the teacher would phone e.v.e.r.y s.i.n.g.l.e d.a.y. Either the teacher, the counsellor, or the principal.

Added to those stressors were the realities, for you all, of living with your unique sons and all the questions that arose for you and I joined your words into a poem reflecting your realities of your stress.

I, too, am the me of now, please hear me

Was your voice heard? I have used the second person singular in those four words, knowing, as I stated in my proposal, that your voices have not been heard in their plurality. Were you heard by the systems, the institutions, both public and private, and the professionals who worked within? This large body includes teachers, consultants and principals, psychologists and social workers, family practitioners and psychiatrists, counsellors and therapists and the theme embodies relationships and a subtle and not-so-subtle pattern of inclusion/exclusion. Closely allied to this theme, and often spilling into it, is the one of diagnosis and treatment. I'll move between the two in sharing your responses, many of which distill the essence of those experiences and relationships.

Lena, you told me that you felt that you were "surrounded by generalizations." I assumed that you were using it as a metaphor for the experimental method because you continued by saying that, as far as you were concerned, when you took Oliver for treatment, "everything was predetermined by the sham of the protocol." You also felt that when you told your story "there" it was only to satisfy "the illusion of participation" and that you were "not heard, because the prediction and the prescription were already made up."

The simplest way for me to characterize the relationships that you have all had with professionals, is by saying that it's been up and down, at times very unsatisfactory and cold and at others, very satisfactory and warm. When you have been heard, with an ethic of care and concern (Noddings, 1990; Martin, 1992) and your voice has been heard, you have felt validated and your feelings of self-worth have rocketed, as you can attest, Joan. You told your story of your doctors' and psychiatrist's respect, and of your present relationship with Lloyd's school, a school that is like a caring community. You also related times at a previous school, when the care and concern were not present, how belittled and humiliated you felt. For you, Caroline, excepting your first encounter with a psychiatrist which has already been shared, and one very upsetting incident with a social worker where "boy, she was something else, 'cos I got in there and she treated me like dirt," you have felt listened to and have been able to give voice.

Lena and Louisa, as I think about your stories I feel as though I have been on a roller-coaster ride. Was that the way you felt, I wonder? You have both experienced the two extremes and have run the gamut of emotions depending on which extreme it was. When you were feeling supported and accepted by the professionals at the group home, Louisa, your self-confidence and "basic gains that were made as far as our being able to deal with it," went up. When the reverse happened, down would go your sensing of self-worth.

When Oliver was diagnosed by a consultant whom you had never met, and you were never given the opportunity to meet to discuss the evaluation despite requesting it Lena, you felt like Dame Edna May Whitty in the 1938 movie " The Lady Vanishes."

We didn't discuss whether, within these changing experiences, you were aware of any temporal differences and whether the unsatisfactory interactions took place at critical periods for you, or if you could see a pattern. I drew a funny little grid, which showed me that the interactions you described, both positive, negative, and neutral, were all over the place, and that the timing did not seem to be particularly relevant. I believe that, just as you and your sons are unique, so are all the professionals included above; the ascriptions to professionalism previously outlined, do not sit well with all professionals; by labeling them, isolating them into a category and objectifying them, we do them the disservice of stereotyping. Mrs. DoAsYouWouldBeDoneBy peers ever o'er my shoulder.

Your feelings about medication, the primary treatment offered, are mixed, and your expressions about medication have been given voice. Louisa, you underscored the worries of Joan and Lena: "And I was worried about the long term effects, too." Caroline worried also. Ryan's troubles seemed different from Roger's didn't they, Caroline? You had been told that Ryan was a "little delayed" and that his (later) diagnosed seizure activity could be controlled by medication. But you continued to be apprehensive for Roger, knowing the effect that the psychotropic medication had had on you. We remember Joan's story about its effect on Lloyd and we're plunged into the uncertainties of trial and error.

You were worried, also, about the lack of "nothing else" being suggested for your sons, such as counselling. You had said that you had requested counselling for Oliver many times, Lena, but that "it just never happened". And I remember asking you, Joan, if you thought that Lloyd was gaining insights through his relationship with the "The Ultimate," as you had told me that you had been taking Lloyd to see him for two years. Your answer sounded familiar: "He sees him for fifteen minutes every three months. It's just about medication. There's no counselling." You hoped that if Nate had someone to talk to, Louisa, he might be able to "get out what was bothering him." You were heard, and at the group home Nate was counselled, but when he returned home your experience of him was the same as "before the treatment."

mothers, your knowing weighs

In the letters, I have presented Ruddick's theorizing about the "demands of mothering," and some of the criticisms about her theory. One such criticism concerns the fact that her theories were based on her talking with "educated, affluent, middle-class American women." Burrowing into the words of our conversations I uncovered many examples, ongoing throughout your lives with your sons, which demonstrated those attributes Ruddick described as "the work demanded of mothers." We didn't discuss socio-economic status, neither yours nor mine. Nor did we measure educational levels, except that you all knew I was a student engaged in research. I don't think you fit the slots above, do you? Affluent? Middle-class? Educated? American? I'm unsure how much money you have to make to be considered in the category of middle-class and I didn't ask you whether you or your partners considered yourselves blue, pink, or white-collar workers. Did your knowledge count? Are you educated? I think so. Question: Will you get your degree in "Living With a Labeled Child?" The one slot that I thought was certain is that you are all Canadian. Critiques of her theory notwithstanding, you were all engaged in the work of mothering.

Wo/mom's way of knowing is the theme that revealed itself to me through more burrowing and I connected it with women as teachers and teachers as women and our knowing through our practice. Your knowing gave you strengths and the courage to persevere and validated once more your sense of self-worth and I have shown in the previous letter your stories of knowing. Your confirmed belief, Joan, that you were providing the best possible environment for Lloyd to help him through his growing and being, shows this. The doctors had told you that "the best they feel is that it is somewhat hereditary".

> And here's a kid who's had every physical and emotional advantage, and yet there's this major handful here and there's problems... there's part of me that says there's no way on earth that with my staying home and nurturing and loving a child [things would have been different]. Maybe with children like this it's best that they are born into this environment...

Bruner and Bornstein (1989) discuss the interactional components of development and remind us that:

> Neither social nor cognitive development proceeds solely on the basis of cultural transmission or genetic determinism...Each individual develops in the context of an environment that has in turn been shaped by other individuals to construct the culture (p. 10).

They stress the conditional aspects of "potentially significant" early influences and state that "categories of interaction exert effects in concert with one another...and with the developmental status of the child (ibid.). The French psychiatrist Jeammet (1992) also discusses interaction and his beliefs :

> The idea we have of our mental functioning and of what governs our interests and relationships partly determines our responses. The idea that mental functioning and relational and affective life can be objectified in the same way as the physiology of the organs ignores the fact that the distinctive characteristic of human beings is their capacity to think about themselves and therefore about where they belong in the world of values. From the starting points of their genetic endowments, the human young are formed not only by the concrete interactions that take place but also by other people's vision of them, as well as their ability to internalize this vision and see themselves (p. 469).

For me, and I hope for you, these psychologist's and psychiatrist's words open the world of possibilities and allow an escape from that boxed-in feeling. Hope can flourish in their words.

hope

Wo/mom's knowledge, grounded in practice, and your strengths and courage shown in your experiences and living, helped me uncover another part of that story which is powerful: The theme of hope. Hope is forward-looking and your thoughts elaborate this. Joan, you spoke of "the light at the end of the tunnel" being visible for you. Lloyd has his good days like this one:

> ...in fact they send a little note home every day, telling you how his day went and today this is the nicest one his teacher has sent all year. She said: 'Lloyd has had a

> perfect day today. We are so proud of him.' And she signed it. And that just said it all.

You know that you probably won't get a note like this every day and that "he has his good days and his bad days" just as most children do. I think that it sounds similar for most adults too.

Hardly had the page been written when you told me about "the horrible last two weeks." You found it hard to bear. You told of Lloyd's swearing and refusing to do work at school and of his being rude and very difficult at the sitters'. His previous eight weeks of excellence faded quickly as you were confronted with this turn-around and that light at the end of the tunnel felt temporarily blocked. Reflecting on it, thinking it through and coming up with possibilities of change in your responses that might affect his way of being, widened the avenue of hope and gave you the impetus to move forward.

Your hopes, Louisa, lie in the personal growth that you envisage for Nate and for yourself, and you scribed the words "personal growth" when you replied to a question that I had written on one of our transcripts. During our conversation:

> You know what I thought? At some point it would be fascinating to talk (to Nate) say when he's twenty-five years old. And to hear what, to try to get some insight into the motivation behind the behaviours, you know. So that you had some kind of er so that you could go back and think: 'Oh. Now I understand why you did that, you know. Now I understand why this is happening.'

My question was about him sharing his understandings now, as well as in ten years' time and you wrote: "That would be of use to him in ten years. A way to see his personal growth." You also wrote: "I can't feel without hope."

"It's kind of strange" you told me, Lena:

> It's a complex and hidden handicap ... on the one hand, this kid seems so fine and normal and even brighter and more exceptional and has so much going and then on the other hand it's just, oh, your hopes can get dashed, and then it gets involved with all the emotional things and assumptions.

On reflection you wondered: "Now it's easy. I look back and think: 'How did I live through it?'"

> Well, it certainly is not crisis or critical like it felt for a couple of years there..but I couldn't move, I couldn't turn around and he couldn't turn around...He's been balky, he's been difficult, he's been very angry but that's sort of changing. I mean he and one, or both, of his sisters, hmm, they'll play around, get little projects going. And I mean, he's always had a really nice streak, you know, like cooperative. And as well, that's increasing more.

For you, your hope lies in your thinking and knowing of yourself in your past experiences:

> I think the main thing is not to get overwhelmed er with the system, regardless of how positive or negative or neutral it may seem in the first instance. And to still see your little boy or little girl as a person first, you know. And to take joy in all their strengths and abilities.

Your just "being there," and talking and listening to Oliver, are the things that you trust will carry him through. As you told me about your hopes of the power of keeping communication open I thought of Cotton's words, and the quotation that I had cited previously. You used words that are strong and optimistic, allowing your hope of liberating: "And drawing him back to what he's been taught, and what he's seen, and what's deep inside him." You also "kept hoping someone would see the situation, the positives and the negatives that Oliver and I had to work with together within our family, within our school, within our community, to get some of this behind us."

You wanted "healthy, normal kids," Caroline. A wish which most moms also have. You realise: "I mean I have a problem area with trust. I think that came from my entire past." Your situation has changed and you now feel: "Yeh, things are going really, you know, pretty good." You have given me permission to present the words you wrote to me after our last meeting to Louisa and Joan and Lena, and to our audience of readers. We will treat them with respect and I pray that your hopes, and all my moms' hopes, will be filled:

> I have come a long way in my life, I have made it through a long hard marriage. Dealing with a husband who went to jail for Murder, a son who has lots of problems, my other son has problems also. That can get hard, but what got me through is hope, always having hope that things will get better. Now I have a daughter, a common-law husband, who I also had a hard time with, dealing with his drinking, but now things are very good for us, he stopped Drinking a little over 1 year ago. We are happy together, and we always hope that Roger and Ryan do good in the future. We don't give up on them. It takes a lot of love and caring.

Thank you, Caroline.

the experience of co-researching

I wish that I could leave your messages of hope, to stand alone on this page, but I need to reflect further. I want to share my thoughts with you on what I perceive the effects of being a co-researcher have meant to you all. Fortunately, you have told me much, and if I write anything that does not fit for you, we have another opportunity to discuss it prior to the final draft of the letters.

Being listened to, in an atmosphere of respect and trust, was not unique for you all, but our engagement over this extended period allowed the discussion of your lived experiences to extend to the depth to which you, yourselves, were comfortable. You were able to share your stories of your anger and frustrations, your sadnesses and distresses, your worries and fears, and your good times, your hopes and joys. We had some grins of shared recognitions, much light laughter, and some deep belly-aching shrieks as something you or I said evoked memories or different ways of looking at things.

You also told me that you were eager to hear each other's stories and "can't wait to read all the letters." Louisa, your note said, "I look forward to your letters." I think that I forgot to tell you that these were going to be pretty long letters, in fact, some of the longest I've ever written! You then responded to my telling that all the letters would be shared, writing that you were really glad and that: "I suppose I still need to know that I'm not alone, other people's related experiences are of a great deal of value to me." At different times throughout the year you have all repeated and rephrased Louisa's need, that of knowing that you are not alone, and you have expressed the hope that, in hearing their stories, you will also be enriched.

The reflecting that our conversations initiated revealed different directions for thoughts to take. Caroline, your courageous message above contains those directions. Another direction was taken, Louisa, when I asked you how you saw Nate relating to extended family members, including an uncle, who, you were reminded, "was just like Nate when he was a kid." You said in a surprised tone:

> You know they do ... I think...I think out of all his uncles, I would say that they have more of a relationship than any of them. Yeh yeh. And I hadn't thought about that, it's interesting.

Parents' brothers also came into our conversations, Lena, and you appreciated hearing from me about other mom's brothers and brothers-in-law. These are all different directions for personal growth and the development of new insights or the reinforcement of those previously thought through. Joan, your telling of your story and its reminders of "intergenerational dysfunction," reinforced your determination to "try to have a good relationship with whatever children I have." You referred to "negative controlling" that you had seen in your mother, grandmother and great-grandmother:

> And I won't do it. And I suppose each mother got better in her time. I mean you can only do what you know...and I'm only hoping that I can improve and that my kids can be really good parents and it can be better instead of worse.

Your own reflecting on your stories revealed changes in yourselves that you may not have articulated previously. Louisa, you wrote:

> I feel so different today than I did then. I'm not the same person. 10 years ago I was 'young' and naive. So different, that it should be a lot longer than 10 years. Motherhood was wonderful then, today it tires me and frustrates me. I don't feel the same joy about it. But I'm better at it. I don't have the same expectations of my

> children now. So it's easier for them.

We discussed journalling and I shared how it had helped me with remembering my own thoughts. As you had always planned to go to college, I lent you a few articles and you felt that they would help you as a new student. I had written a note to you in which I had said that I felt "just at the beginning of new (to me) and different ways of knowing and that I still wanted to know more." You wrote back: "I agree, I know how you feel. That's how I feel about school. The hunger to learn more. Take it just a little further. It's infinite." You had told me about your volunteer work with women and your plans:

> I always wanted to return to school. I started out with math because I wanted to be a nurse but my health wouldn't allow that. Social work was the natural alternative. I'm primarily interested in women's issues.

At a later time you told me that nothing was going to stop you from accepting the place that you had been offered: "It's my turn now. I've done for them (the family) all these years. They can start turning around and doing for themselves." I will be interested in your response to Goodrich and Code.

You "grew up, basically dancing for everybody," Joan, which helped you to set your "own boundaries," and I reminded myself to ask you whether you had read "Women who Run With the Wolves" by Estes, a book written from a Jungian perspective, full of stories and myths; a book that reveals the inner strengths of women.

> Women who are tortured often develop a dazzling kind of perception that has uncanny depth and breadth. Although I would never wish anyone tortured in order to learn the secret ins and outs of the unconscious, the fact is, having lived through

> gross repression causes gifts to arise that compensate and protect.
>
> In that respect a woman who has lived a torturous life and delved deeply into it definitely has inestimable depth. Though she came to it through pain, if she has done the hard work of clinging to consciousness, she will have a deep and thriving soul-life and a fierce belief in herself regardless of occasional ego-wavering (1992, p. 364).

I have used this long quote, even though our meaning of torture may differ, because you have felt pain. The quality of pain differs for us all, dependent on our particularities and contexts, but the pain is real for each of us. You shared the effects of the process we have joined in together, Lena. You explained what the experience of being a co-researcher had done for you:

> It has helped me to release the pain. Pain which I was almost in denial about. It's helped to give me distance. It's been positive, not in a dramatic sense, but I've been able to see the absurdity of it all. I was doubting my own perspective. Maybe it's time to let them make reflections.

By "them" you were meaning those in the school system. You had told me earlier, what a wonderful mimic Oliver is and how he can ad-lib like a stand-up comic, imitating and improvising and creating his own humorous monologues. You noted that adult comics have their words written for them, whereas Oliver writes his own. Your plea is: "Let someone see his goodness. All they see him as is a cocky little smart-mouth." You have made this plea before and I think that it is one that all mothers want for their children. You wanted them to see "the positives as well as the negatives" because you felt:

> We're losing ground here. The gap is getting bigger and bigger and we have..like there's a child here who walks, talks and has interests and why can't someone come up with a way to use his strengths and address his weaknesses?

Telling our stories does take courage as does living the stories, and when the reflecting releases a balm, not as you say, in a dramatic way, Lena, but in a gentle way, the balm can heal wounds. The healing process can be a painful one and old wounds can reopen in expected or unexpected ways, and these reopenings have been part of your stories too, and you have shared those times. Often we have to start again, and again. Bateson calls those who do this," Zigzag people. Learning to transfer experience from one cycle to the next, we only progress like a sailboat tacking into the wind" (1994, p. 82). Change and growth do seem to be cyclical and circular, don't they? They may spiral upward and sometimes spin tangentially, as you have all discovered.

I bring your stories and my narrative for your response

We meet mid-December. We discuss your Christmas plans and I see your preparations. Your home is bedecked, Joan, with gaily colored and crafted hangings and a lighted tree, and we both acknowledge the influence of your Scandinavian roots. You are preparing for end-of-term exams, Louisa. Neither of us can believe how quickly this term has gone by, and we then reflect that it must have modelled itself on the year, which has flown for us both. We talk of family, and you tell me, Lena, of your plans to be with Poppa, your father and the grandad with whom Oliver is "very close." You show me the Xeroxed photographs of Poppa and you and "the kids," which you're sending as Christmas gifts to family on a distant continent, and I see Oliver's eager expression and twinkly eyes shining through each photograph. We discuss the "treats," Caroline, that you and Hank have organised, so that each son has a "special" time with you both. You're taking Ryan to a performance of "Ice Capades." This will be the first time you have seen a "live" skating performance and our talk contrasts your previous solitude and hermit-like living when you quote Hank's astounded: "Boy, have you even lived on this planet?"

Ryan is very happy in his school and I read the affirmations on the kitchen table: the papers that show of his progress have come home from class. You tell me that Roger is no longer on medication. The summer's "drug holiday" turned out well and the psychiatrist said, "Let's just leave him off and we'll see how it goes." It's going well. I listen to your telling of his teacher's positive comments and contentment appears on your face. Roger comes home for lunch and proudly shows me more of his treasures. I see a relaxed, happy boy, and when I ask you, you tell me that he is "opening up" more. He shows his little sister something in a gentle, caring manner.

You retell the story of Nate's father being called to the school, Louisa. Nate is not doing his school work and is considered at risk for failure. He is still a voracious reader, his writing is fine "when he wants to do it," and it remains puzzling to you both why he continues his way of being. You know "he is my/our responsibility" and you say that you are wondering how long this will go on. Will it finish when he is sixteen? You are beginning to feel that it's at this age that you will tell him that he's on his own from now on. You say: "He's going to have to bear the consequences all by himself." In the past, we spoke of the future, and you wrote: "What I don't want to be thinking then is 'what if' " and I wonder now whether you have relinquished the guilt that you layered on yourself?

Oliver has been thinking, you tell me Lena, of "choices" he could have made: "Yeh. I guess I could have done it that way, instead." You experience growth in his increasing willingness to "take stock." You retell the story of the school principal who castigated you: "He must be seeing violence at home. No kid could be violent like this without seeing it at home." You weren't able to establish any credibility, Lena: "They believed I was in denial." It was that same principal who spanked Oliver "on the butt." You laugh as you relate how, a few days ago, Oliver said: "One day when I drive past his school in my limo I'm going to slowly roll down my window. I just want to see the look on his face." We both realise Oliver's plans for his future and experienced his hope.

On the preceding pages, I wrote of your recent distress, Joan, at the sudden reversal in Lloyd's improvements, both at home and at school and at the sitters'. We talk for several hours about how this has been for you. I show you those words of yours that are included in the narrative, and my words of interpretation. You are thoughtful, and nod your head in acquiescence, frequently. You start weeping when you read our moms' words of stress, assembled without artifice, and my heart pounds again. When I reassure you that I will be giving a copy of the completed work to each of you your eyes shine. "This will be his legacy," you say. And you reiterate, slowly: "His legacy."

You tell me that Hank and your girl-friend want to read "all this writing," Caroline, and when I say that there will be a bound copy for all my moms, you look pleased. Louisa, you ask me, and a day later, Lena, you ask the same question. "What will happen now, to your stories and the narrative?" "I hope your book is not just going to sit there on the shelf in the library. Lots of people never go back to university once they've graduated," you said, Lena, and then you asserted: "It should be mandatory reading for every teacher."

we have seen the community and it is we

As the inquirer in this narrative, as I have written before, my hope is to share your stories with the "we" who entitle this paragraph; the "we" who become mothers and fathers and who may face our unique selves daily. The "we" who are students and may become teachers, lawyers, psychologists, nurses, doctors, social workers, and the many who will enter relationships with us, our children, and our families. Our community comprises the "we" of multiple ways of being and knowing. Communities share, have joint interests, practise together acknowledging diversity and recognizing the energy and strength of collaboration. Thomas Udjik, an Inuk sculptor, presents his concept of community in a soap-stone carving bearing the same name (1994). In the photograph of his sculpture the thirteen figures appear closely bonded and the central Inuk, one arm outstretched, seems to invite others in. This invitation to join is welcomed by those who search "for others with whom to be in community, for a place to be with others with whom I could share my struggles, my uncertainties, and my work." (Clandinin, 1993.)

You spoke of community, Lena, when you said: "... it goes along with my philosophy, well, what am I really here on earth for?" And then you laughed, and I smiled with you, knowing that that's been a teaser for us all. You added: "To be involved with people or to be rich? I have to give myself that pep-talk to myself every once in a while." Me too, Lena. It's hard not to get caught up in an acquisitive society, isn't it? You thought that meeting as groups of women and moms could be supportive, but cautioned:

> I think er..actually, I was just reading a couple of months' old copy of Homemaker's on the breast cancer way, and I think it should be more on that way as people then, so that you can be advocates for each other. So that someone else can come with you when you go and see the principal. Or that, not to get it organised, not 'who's going to be the secretary?' and 'now we're going to start putting out a newsletter' already. Because I've been through twenty years of that already. Every little kind of movement for an issue within six months you're incorporating and fund-raising and you know..And then it's institutionalized and you're an interest group and all of that.

And then you spoke of the action that you thought would be helpful and that would "keep the humanity and spirit of er a community, a natural group of people."

> Not where you sit around and whine about things, you know, but just -'OK. Oh. I didn't think of this.' 'Do you want me to come with you?' you know, or 'Why don't I come and maybe that other person will be a little mindful too if I'm sitting there and writing down everything he's saying.'

Like Greene (1994) you want a "playful" community, a "humane" community. Greene was speaking of educators, and as educators all

> What matters is an affirmation of energy and the passion of reflection in a renewed hope of common action, of face-to-face encounters among friends and strangers, striving for meaning, striving to understand (p. 459).

This narrative tells of diversity and probes the wish for inclusion and understanding. More than thirty years ago Bruner alerted for us that our capacity to cope with knowledge is "hugely exceeded by (the) potential knowledge contained in our environment." He claimed that, in order not to be overwhelmed by the overload, we deal with this by perceiving things "schematically" rather than "in detail, or we represent a class of diverse things by some sort of average typical instance" (1963, p. 65). With the exponential increase in our findings of the world around us, the tendency to reduction and essentialism is ever with us. My hope is that, within the themes, patterns and connections uncovered, the uniqueness, diversity and practical knowing of mothers will be heard and its strength recognized by all the "we's" above. When this occurs spaces will be allowed for the listenings and tellings of the multiple voices of uniqueness and inclusion, with the three "C's" of caring, concern and connection as the key processual mode. Insulation against isolation and loneliness will then be offered and opportunities for community growth opened.

my curriculum never closes

My inquiry will never close; I view this but as a temporary resting place. You will be engaged with your re-tellings as will I with mine. A young friend was telling me of his inventions and we were being called for supper. "I can't stop now," he said, "I have so much more to tell you." I know how he felt. It's how I feel now, that I have so much more to tell. I will tell more, as will you all, now and in the future. Our uncoverings will add to our knowledge and understandings; incremental gleanings to glisten in the ever-changing "landscape of learning."

I have learned much about myself during this process of inquiry. I prefaced my earliest story of teaching with a quotation by Grumet: "Women who teach bring their curriculum to their lives." My curriculum remains with me and I realise that the question with which I began this inquiry also remains with me and will travel with me into my future.

Relationships have been important for me in my life and their continued importance was realised in our connections. "Connected knowing involves feeling, because it is rooted in relationship; but it also involves thought" (Belenky, et al., 1986, p. 121). I've thought so much during this inquiry that sometimes my head has throbbed to bursting. Vicarious experiences are often decried but I felt your pain deep in my being, just as I felt your joys and triumphs, and I hope that in this narrative I have uncovered them for others. I hope those around us that they, too, will understand and open to themselves your lived experience.

Through the recognition of wo/mom's practical knowledge I have learned the freedom to recognize my own. I have allowed myself to sing softly, "I Know Where I'm Going." I say softly because I am ever mindful of the entrenchment, within me, of the metaphor of measurement, and its attendant comparisons and competition. Around the kitchen table we laugh about our entrenchment in the measurement metaphor, allowing that it is inherited by many of us, but our laughter chastises our old habits and inheritances and urges us forward.

"Schools have never been neutral places. For centuries schools have been places where some people's children learn to be subordinate to other people's children" (Grumet, 1988, p. 181). For me, the metaphor of competition sits awkwardly in education, in art and science, in living. It has no place in narrative either, as Lather (1991) notes:

> 'In the reflexive tale,' I use a narrative versus an argumentative rationality. The latter creates winners and losers while the former works to 'illustrate rather than claim' (Van Maanen, 1988:122). The text is used to display rather than analyze.

> Data are used differently, rather than used to support analysis, they are used demonstratively, performatively (p. 150).

In this narrative, if we are transformed, we are all winners. "Life histories of people ordinarily not heard from can have a profoundly humanizing influence (Langness, 1978, p. 117).

I have learned and relearned what I thought that I knew but must have forgotten, that the right environment is critical for new learnings. One year ago I wrote:

> During my recent return to university I have (again) been fortunate and have experienced a learning situation where space has been allowed and I have been opened to further readings and encouraged to deeper reflections about knowledge, and my own knowing.

It was here that reflection was encouraged and my story-writing self emerged. The experience unlocked for me stories deep inside my being that almost bowled me over and I wondered how they could have stayed hidden so long. I discovered the courage to reveal myself by sharing some of them in that created space, a space in a collaborative community of learners where there were few distances. Having had that experience, I realised that I wanted no distance to separate your stories and my telling of them, and when other formats for writing narratives were discussed, and the idea of letters mooted, it felt right for me.

'from laughter to insight' Sewall

I was asked to talk about my research inquiry at a recent Works in Progress, held at the Centre for Teacher Education. (You've already "met" some of my friends there.) I wrote a special paper and told a particular story telling how I was continually bumping into myself, all over my inquiry, and how I couldn't help joking and using puns, something I don't think I do when speaking. I called myself a "klutz" and evoked laughter, but the story that followed was not funny and I had the same feelings that you have experienced. I tell the story here, as I told it then. I titled it: Splat! Face to face with a mirror image.

> She had been called in to speak to the head. She was apprehensive. Her heart felt thumpety but she thought: 'Perhaps I can find out what's going on'. 'We'll meet in my office,' the head said. She was ushered in and with little preamble was told: 'They're being very disruptive: calling and shouting out; being difficult; not wanting to stay in their chair, and really bothering others. They'll have to be moved. There's another place where that kind of behaviour can be dealt with. Perhaps you should phone the doctor and the medication should be changed or increased.'
>
> Her thumping heart rose and became a lump in her throat as she tried to discover: 'Could you tell me a little bit more? Like ... what are the things they're saying and when does it usually happen? How are they disturbing others?' 'Well I wasn't there, but I've been told ... No. I haven't read any exact descriptions. Let's see. Oh! Here it says 'noisy' and yes, here's another entry ... 'noisy'. 'Oh. No! There hasn't been any hitting or anything like that. And I do have to tell you that others here are a bit cliquey. Yes. You're right! It has only been three weeks.'
>
> The 'she' is me; and the 'they' is an eighty-three year old relative in residential care. Abruptly I came face-to-face with images of my own experiences. Several years ago I had written: 'Who gets in and who stays out is often a very moot point'. I

> was referring not only to segregated classes, but to time-out rooms and 'pull-outs' for the 'gifted' or 'the resource-room kids.' This mootedness informs the precariousness of assessment criteria and the need for a caring vigilance before we box ourselves and 'ourothers' into corners from which there may be little escape. You addressed this Lena when you said: It's this difficulty when things are institutionalized. Everything is defined, and people have to meet those definitions ... and if we can't fit in or don't meet those definitions ... I dunno ... it feels like we're surrounded by generalizations.
>
> I felt trapped, as have you all, by the power of institutions and the solitude of the protestation of the individual voice. A 'Whoops! Here we go again' feeling swept over me in that institution and washed over me once more when we met in October, Lena. Except that, for you, as you expressed it, it probably felt more like a tidal wave.

At that same Works in Progress evening, my friend Lynda enquired about evaluation. When Lynda and I spoke of evaluation, and the famous theorists who describe what it looks like in qualitative research, I burst out:

> You know, Lynda, I was a vegetarian for four or five years when I was in my twenties. And I used to get so irritated by those Nut 'Hamburger' Patties and Lentil 'Meat' Loaf recipes. I believe some of those theorists are still caught up with the images of the words of the positivist world.

Miller and Crabtree (1994) discuss how they perceive the "issue of validity, reliability, and generalizability".

> Developing a common language does not mean being co-opted by the dominant frames of discourse and having to use the language of analogy - transferability analagous to generalizability. The prevailing mode of discourse for qualitative research no longer needs to be one of justification (Kahn, 1993). The rules of evidence for qualitative research are - telling methodology, rhetorically and convincing stories. Local context and the human story - of which each individual and community story is a reflection - are primary goals of qualitative research (p. 348).

Lynda responded to my vegetarian story by saying: "Yes. If your stories move me, well, that's enough for me".

I look above my desk and see an early-scribed quote on a Post-it note (honors to Bakhtin): "Comedy: the world's second truth," and I reflect that my use of comedy is both subversive and palliative. The subversive quality has been discussed earlier. The palliative aspect alludes to "if I don't laugh I'll cry:" tears of sorrow for the pain that you have experienced in your living and tears of anger for its political implications; tears of sorrow for my erstwhile lassitude and half-awakedness and tears of anger and shame for my former compliance in policies and practices that I felt to have quavery ethics, and in so doing, highlighting my own as equally quavery. My sister had a friend from Russia, who would pronounce with determination and accent, "Vot voss, voss!" I think of her words, they give me pause, and thus, as tight-rope walker, I reassert my balance, cease flagellation knowing it to be self-destructive, and realise that germane to our laughter is the recognition of our strengths as well as our frailties, and that the grins and guffaws and belly-aching laughs release the energy to act on newly-discovered wonderings and possibilities.

Ian's painting above our "kitchen table" in the Centre brings to my memory another feeling of being bowled over. Ian is a story-teller 'par excellence' and I had that feeling twelve months ago, when I read his unpublished doctoral dissertation "The Folkloral Voice" (Sewall, 1994). His magical words overwhelm. Annie, my friend in the Centre, reminds me of his comments about comedy: "I believe it is the laughter that brings us to the story ... and it is the laughter which keeps us in the story, even when it isn't easy to hear" (p. 11). Ian also believed in the joyful journey "from laughter to insight," which moved me yet again to reflect on your words and our laughter.

our homecoming festival

I know that I shall rejoice with you, and I want to dance a celebration for your courage and your achievements. I won't shake the pom-poms this time because I read that contemporary cheerleaders consider them intrusive to the clean lines of their elaborated gymnastic (Edmonton Journal, 1994). No! This dance will be a post-modern Merce Cunningham experience which Janesick describes

> I learned to trust the body and to draw upon lived experience...For Cunningham dance is a chance encounter among movement, sound, and light through space (1994, p. 218).

It will honor your lives. And I want to be both choreographer and dancer, even with arthritic knees and aging body, for this research inquiry and this particular way of telling your stories is my responsibility, and the weight of that responsibility thickens and transforms my muscles, allowing a dynamic. Unexpectedly, crinkling its way through the choreography, comes the blended wool of Tony's thick sweater, all unravelled and lively as an electric eel. It weaves its way in and out of the dance with all the vivacity that it has shown in this narrative. You described Oliver as "a very complex little ball of wool," Lena, and on another occasion, you told me of a psychiatrist's comment , "Oh well! As long as he's not unravelling sweaters." I asked your permission to inquire of them the significance they would attach to such an action. You gave me your OK but my calls were never returned from their office. Ought I to be concerned about my own mental status with my eagerness to unravel, to know more? Will it ease their minds to know that in this dance my creation will reassemble the crinkly wool and spin it loosely? allowing light and air and sound and space as symbols for the entrance of new knowings.

When I started reading some excerpts from my letters to my friends and colleagues around the kitchen table, they became very quiet, as they all felt your experiences in their hearts; for they, too, are teachers and mothers and women. They called out: "Don't stop! Please don't stop!" I knew then that I had told your stories in a way that could affect audiences and engage their attention. Barbara Tuchman wrote in the New York Times (1989), "I want the reader to turn the page and keep on turning to the end" (Richardson, 1994, p. 516). How transforming if that is the response of our audience in that we want your stories to be catalysts for further thought and action.

"For what I have experienced and understood ... I answer with my life." Bakhtin wrote those words, and every time I reread them, I find their courage and poignancy overwhelming. Casey uses them as part of the title of her book "I Answer With My Life: Life Histories of Women Teachers Working for Social Change" (1993). The context for the first part of Casey's (1993) title is quoted in full on the frontispiece of her book: "What is it that guarantees the internal connection between the elements of personality? Only the unity of responsibility. For what I have experienced and understood...I answer with my life." Bakhtin did. His life story is inspiring. His life works were precursors to the writings of many influential Western philosophers whose significance and influence is still felt.

I am sitting inside and outside my writing simultaneously, thinking of you, Joan, Lena, Caroline and Louisa, and am wondering how you feel now that you have read the collected letters and heard each others' stories; the stories of living with your sons that are twined with the life of family and schools and professionals, as is mine. But now, as the months press, out in front of us is our audience. The press of months also forcibly reminds me that,waiting in the wings, stands my committee, willing to help, and generous with their time, whose reality is as constructed, as is yours and mine. We all have storied lives. It is our letters, our stories, that we want our audience to hear because "they reveal the reality of a life that defies or contradicts the rules" (Personal Narratives Group [PNG], 1989, p. 7). We want them to understand that sometimes an apple falls both near and far from the tree; as every tree is different, so is each apple. We'll ask our audience to pick an apple from the ground and from the tree. Taste them. Take note that each has its special mix of flavor. And savor them slowly. For I position myself with the above-mentioned authors of the PNG when I say that I am not "talking about *a* truth or *the* truth."

> We were talking about *truths,* a decidedly plural concept meant to encompass the multiplicity of ways in which a woman's life story reveals and reflects important features of her conscious experience and social landscape, creating from both her essential reality (p. 14).

Like the women teachers in Casey's (1993) research, you have transformed the original question of this inquiry, transformed it into a question about the meaning of your own lives. And you have given us a telling answer.

Holmquist and Clark (1984) have unwrapped Bakhtin for me and, using their words and his, I have been able to delve into "the relations between people and between persons and things that cuts across religious, political and aesthetic boundaries" (p.348). I hope to be able to continue to delve deeper and want to acknowledge them both. They ask us to read Bakhtin:

> In that spirit, we pay homage to the generic expectations of closure by quoting Bakhtin's final words on the impossibility of endings, with which he closed the last article he ever wrote: 'There is neither a first word nor a last word. The contexts of dialogue are without limit. They extend into the deepest past and the most distant future. Even meanings born in dialogues of the remotest past will never be finally grasped once and for all, for they will always be renewed in later dialogue. At any present moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogue's later course when it will be given new life. For nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will someday have its homecoming festival' (1979, p. 3
> 73).

For the homecoming festival, I compose a poem.

there are no endings. Beginnings, middles, futures. Thudding my temporality
I read your words, the numbers escalate
a hundred eighty top below a hundred ten and rising. Are our infinities different or just
indifferent?

Things left unsaid but hinted at. the flames fan high but higher still for some, the edge
cutting and cutting; down in the swamp or up on high, aloof and distancing he stands

oh no please not with gun in hand.

maxinemadelinevirginiajeandorothy your given names stream through my days and
cast me high and low and would you have chosen others and there you are again
distancing distancing

Oh Mother Earth have you ensnared us with your vision and your tongue?

Will I disappear from my own life and yours like an elusive dye without its salt?
Is the acid bath too weak?
Or is she so engrossed with her own metaphor for life that like the knob-pushing
camcorder sees not life but life removed missing the action and the touch?

Is it the question behind the question like those long-bearded rabbis told or did they bury
eve with their beards? Did she drop that apple far or near? oh you were mad when you
heard that. they said it yes they did and meant it I have not merely seemed to say your
words. with their eyes they see not and they see. try living it you said and then you'll feel

so quickly trampled
guilty, guilty with the blame. you blame me and I myself also. is it my fault and what if?
O difference could I have done thee

but I am thee and thee art me and how quickly it goes from a.d.d. to o.d.d. and then some
more...and which comes first but those dam words that you can't hear to spell. and then

it's all behind like the bare bum he wiggled on the desk to moon the class and he only six and they loved it and laughed like we had done at home. and he saw it on tv. and dumb and even dumber despite those numbers, [silently say] 136, 114, 130. but hey what's in a number? and the existential question is ever with me and I with it and all of us.

he can come if he will follow, you said. the trust falters for you, entwines again, have you burned all your bridges and have I? under the cover to deaden the noise and of course the pain. oh why is my pain yours and ours and theirs. was he telling his nightmares or his daymares? or did you put them there, those thoughts? they said you did you know. but why these questions questions? daisy please do give me the answers.

there are no easy answers she said
just like the title of the book by klutznick and of course by many
it's such a catchy phrase. nothing new under the sun, it's all been said and done before

do i love you, let me, too, count.. one and one does it make four? is it enough but he's got more? is it what the world needs? luv luv luv luv oh mother i'm too old but not too old. and when do the three c's equal contentment?

then are you the living myth of your own legend and that is why my fingers fly key-struck? is it the trickster? It is! It is! unique ones. primo uno, aleph echad, abracadabra the trickster spies and turns to quicken the hoop snake of ursula's tale

and we laughed and we laughed and we laughed and the tears ran down and down joining analogies of bastardized power and then you upped and yupped and said join 'em not fight 'em.

but i still say you can do more from the outside in than the inside out so peel the apple and sweeten your tongue and rejoice in his tenderness and strength and jokes and changing ways both up and down and yours. and see theirs too for we are they and they are we and sing like gaia joining connected and embrace uncertainties and possibilities and peer into the future and the past and use them if they fit. Esse Esse mein kind.

to the festival and our futures

Sincerely

Joy-Ruth

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APPENDIX I Eligibility (1993-94)

SEVERE BEHAVIOUR DISORDERS (INCLUDING AUTISM)

Student Name ________________________ School ________________________

LEVEL 7

Behavior Disordered: Students whose behaviour has been clinically diagnosed by a psychiatrist or chartered psychologist, and who demonstrates severely aberrant behaviour which is chronic and pervasive in any school setting. These students are psychotic, dangerously aggressive and/or demonstrate extremely bizarre, autistic or compulsive behaviour. Documentation of the attempts made by the school to provide suitable programming is required. The behavioural assessment should document the nature, frequency and severity of the condition or disorder both by anecdotal records and through the checklist of aberrant behaviour which is part of the eligibility request form.

ATTACH ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION TO THE FORM

CLINICAL DIAGNOSIS Attach statement by psychiatrist or chartered psychologist which provides the clinical diagnosis, documents the nature and severity of the disorder and the date the diagnosis was made. Ensure a copy is maintained in the student's file.

BEHAVIOURS OF GREATEST CONCERN Provide information on the frequency, severity and duration of the behaviours of greatest concern this school year. Attach anecdotal record of behaviours. Describe actions undertaken by the school to change the maladaptive behaviour.

OTHER AGENCIES List other agencies which have been involved with the student because of the behaviour disorder.

ABERRANT BEHAVIOURS OBSERVED BETWEEN________________(dates).

For each of the behaviours below, circle the term which best indicates the frequency that the behavior has been exhibited in school. D - daily (at least once a day or 5 times per week), W - weekly (at least once a week, but less that 5 times per week), M - Monthly (at least once a month, but less than weekly), O - occasionally (less that once a month, but the behaviour has been exhibited during the school year), N - never (the behaviour has not been observed in the school setting).

AGGRESSION AND DESTRUCTIVENESS

D W M O N	Violent temper tantrums (screaming, throwing self on floor)
D W M O N	Temper tantrums (crying, screaming, stamping feet)
D W M O N	Injures others when in rage
D W M O N	Injures others deliberately when not in rage
D W M O N	Uses objects as weapons against others
D W M O N	Damages own projerty - toys, clothing, books
D W M O N	Vandalism - damages public property
D W M O N	Hurts or kills animals
D W M O N	Interferes with others' activities (blocking passage, snatching things away)
D W M O N	Swears, curses, uses obscene language

D W M O N	Yells or screams threats of violence
D W M O N	Deliberate violation of school rules
D W M O N	Is hostile toward people in authority
D W M O N	Disrupts games, group activities by refusing to follow rules
D W M O N	Defiant, non-compliant
D W M O N	Argumentative
D W M O N	Intimidating
D W M O N	Takes out anger on objects, or displaces to innocent people
D W M O N	Steals
D W M O N	Lies about situations, self or others

EMOTIONAL CONTROLS

D W M O N	Severe negative reaction to criticism or correction
D W M O N	Blames own mistakes on others
D W M O N	Tantrums if does not get own way
D W M O N	Complains of unfairness even when equal shares or privileges have been given
D W M O N	Acts suspicious of others
D W M O N	Marked excessive mood swings for no apparent reason
D W M O N	Talks about suicide
D W M O N	Frightened and insecure in daily activities
D W M O N	Incoherent speech under stress
D W M O N	Severe and persistent fears regarding new situations, tests, etc.
D W M O N	Demands excessive praise
D W M O N	Demands excessive reassurance
D W M O N	Overestimates own abilities
D W M O N	Excessively dependent
D W M O N	Inability to adapt behaviour to changing expectations
D W M O N	Behaves in manner expected for much younger child

STEREOTYPED/RITUALISTIC MANNERISMS

D W M O N	Self Stimulation: rocking, hand flapping, whirling
D W M O N	Self Injury: banging head, biting hand
D W M O N	Echolalia: echoes questions & statements made by others
D W M O N	Verbal Perseveration: repeats sounds, words or phrases over and over
D W M O N	Insists on keeping certain objects with him
D W M O N	Routinely feels, smells, or tastes objects inappropriately
D W M O N	Frequently gets involved in complicated rituals (e.g., lining things up)
D W M O N	Fixates on one characteristic (e.g., size, position, colour)
D W M O N	Strong negative reaction to changes in routine environment)
D W M O N	Compulsive behaviours (e.g., overly meticulous, frequent hand washing)

LACK OF AFFECT

D W M O N	Seems not to hear, so a hearing loss is suspected
D W M O N	Speech is atonal and arhythmic
D W M O N	Not responsive to others' expressions or feelings
D W M O N	Actively avoids eye contact, looks through people
D W M O N	Resists being touched or held
D W M O N	Unaware of surroundings, may be oblivious to dangers
D W M O N	Preoccupied with inanimate objects

D W M O N	Does not use "I", may have pronoun reversal (e.g., you for I)
D W M O N	Does not respond when called by name
D W M O N	Sits or stands in one position for a long period of time
D W M O N	Isolates self, chooses not to participate with others
D W M O N	Is unable to distinguish fantasy from reality
D W M O N	Confusion of time and/or place
D W M O N	Appears flustered and confused
D W M O N	Depressed, chronic sadness
D W M O N	Mute, even though able to speak

ACTIVITY LEVEL

D W M O N	Runs away if not constantly supervised
D W M O N	Does not stay in seat during group sessions
D W M O N	Constantly runs or jumps around room
D W M O N	Highly distractable, does not attend for more than a minute
D W M O N	Fingers, feet, hands constantly in motion (tapping, drumming)
D W M O N	Does not stay on task unless someone is standing over him
D W M O N	Requires excessive supervision and control
D W M O N	Highly impulsive, has great difficulty holding back a response

ECCENTRIC HABITS AND MANNERISMS

D W M O N	Has peculiar posture or mannerisms
D W M O N	Talks to self out loud
D W M O N	Makes growling, humming or other unpleasant noises
D W M O N	Laughs or cries inappropriately
D W M O N	Hoards things, including food
D W M O N	Saves and wears unusual articles
D W M O N	Eats inedibles
D W M O N	Removes or tears off own clothing
D W M O N	Smears or plays with urine or faecal matter
D W M O N	Hallucinates
D W M O N	Conversation irrelevant and nonsensical

OTHER BEHAVIOURS

D W M O N	Touches others inappropriately
D W M O N	Sexually aggressive, abusive
D W M O N	Masturbates publicly
D W M O N	Covers ears at many sounds, or avoids lights
D W M O N	Does not show a startle response to loud noise
D W M O N	Does not react to pain (e.g., cuts, bruises)
D W M O N	Pretends to be ill
D W M O N	Frequent headaches, stomach aches, nausea
D W M O N	Nervous habits, (e.g., tics, scratching)
D W M O N	Learns tasks, but forget quickly (from one moment to the next)
D W M O N	Incontinent without physical cause
D W M O N	Humour markedly inappropriate for time, place, occasion
D W M O N	Wanders off if not constantly supervised

APPENDIX II

University of Alberta Faculty of Education
Department of Educational Psychology

CONSENT FORM

I ______________________________, having been fully informed as to the nature and the purpose of this research, agree to being a co-researcher in this study about my lived experience as a mother whose child has been diagnosed as severely behaviour disordered.

I understand that my involvement is voluntary and that I may decide to freely withdraw at any point in the study.

I further understand that my participation in this study will be kept confidential. My name and the names of my family members, or any other identifying information, will be changed when the study is written. The audio-tapes of our conversations will be transcribed by the originator of the research and the tapes will be erased when the study is completed.

______________________ ______________________________

Date Signature

APPENDIX III VITAE

Caroline.

Caroline's mother and father were born in Europe and lived there until after the Second World War when they came to Canada. They settled in Quebec and moved to Western Canada when Caroline was a young pre-adolescent girl. Her parents subsequently divorced. Her mother lives in the same city as Caroline and her father lives in Europe.She has seen him once during the last fifteen years. Caroline is an only child.

Caroline has three children, Roger, Ryan and Irena, whose ages at the beginning of the narrative inquiry were nine, seven, and one-and-a-half years, respectively. Caroline is divorced from Bob, the boys' father. Hank and Caroline have been partners for four years and Irena is their daughter. All three children live with Hank and Caroline.

Caroline's concern about her younger sons Ryan's behavior and affect began when he was two years old, and he has been seen by psychiatrists regularly since that time. He was assessed at Fieldcrest Hospital and was diagnosed by a psychiatrist as severely behaviour disordered when he was five. Prior to that he was an out-patient at Fieldcrest, and subsequently he was an in-patient for eight months. Ryan is now in a self-contained class for students with the same diagnosis - behaviour disordered. Roger, Caroline's older son, was reported two years ago as being "very aggressive at school, especially on the playground." He was then diagnosed by a behavior consultant as Disruptive Disorder - Oppositional-Defiant (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder DSM-III-R) Roger is included with his peers in a regular class at his home school.

Lena.

Lena grew up in Eastern Canada and her family moved to Western Canada many years ago. She has one brother and two sisters. Lena and her husband separated five years ago and they have subsequently divorced. Lena and her three children live together. Rosalyn is nineteen, Helga is nearly fourteen and Oliver is eleven years old. Lena says that they all have a close relationship with her father (the children's grandfather), who lives in a small Prairie town, and visit him regularly. The children visit their father occasionally. Two years ago Oliver was diagnosed by a psychiatrist as Disruptive Disorder - Oppositional-Defiant, and Conduct Disorder. (DSM-III-R) He has been assessed as having a high IQ and severe learning difficulties. He is in a self-contained classroom in an urban school district.

Louisa.

Louisa is married and she and her husband have three sons Wesley age four, Josh age nine, and Nate age fifteen. Louisa's own parents are divorced and her father lives with his partner in the same city as Louisa, whilst her mother and her second husband live a thousand miles away.

Nate was diagnosed by a psychiatrist as behaviour disordered when he was eight years old and has been placed in a foster home and an urban group home for short periods. When he was twelve years old, he was placed in a treatment group home in the country. He returned to live with his parents almost two years ago. Nate had been in self-contained class-rooms for more than five years but is now currently in an urban high school, where he is receiving extra assistance for his schoolwork. He is reported as having a high IQ.

Joan.

Joan grew up in Eastern Canada in a large urban centre. Her parents are divorced, her father and only brother still live in the east and her mother lives in the USA. Joan moved to Western Canada when she was nineteen and was married shortly afterwards. Joan and her husband separated four years ago and they subsequently divorced. They have one son Lloyd who is eight years old. Lloyd lives with his mother and her partner and sees his father regularly. Lloyd was diagnosed Disruptive Disorder: Attention-Deficit; Oppositional-Defiant (DSM-III-R) by a psychiatrist at Fieldcrest Hospital. Lloyd was in a self-contained classroom for two years. He is currently in a regular classroom. He is assessed as having a high IQ and severe learning difficulties.

Joy Ruth

Joy Ruth grew up in the United Kingdom and came to Canada in 1960. She and her husband have retired from careers in education. Their three children are adults. Joy Ruth is involved in further research inquiry.

Reference.

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